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## **Young People and Discernment of Vocations According to the Teachings of Saint John Paul II**

### **Abstract**

Many young men and women are often confused when it comes to choosing their vocations and careers. According to Pope John Paul II in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, “Each Christian vocation comes from God and is God’s gift. However, it is never bestowed outside of or independently of the Church. Instead it always comes about in the Church and through the Church a luminous and living reflection of the mystery of the Blessed Trinity.” What churches are doing with youth is commendable. Pope John Paul II earned the confidence of young people because he took them seriously. They sensed that he understood their concerns. He challenged them to give their lives to Christ. He appealed to their high ideals, inviting them to take a lead in the New Evangelization. Amidst the contemporary challenges facing young people, it would be appropriate to find ways of helping youth discern God’s call in their daily struggles. This implies learning to discern God’s voice hidden in the chaos of other worldly voices. The worldly allurements seem to have a great impact amongst youth. They therefore require some guidance from their parents and spiritual leaders in order for them to make the right decisions. This article looks at how Pope John Paul II treated the issue of vocational discernment among young people.

### **Keywords**

John Paul II, Vocation, Discernment, Young People.

## 1. Introduction

Pope St. John Paul II had a deep love and compassion for young people. In his 1985 letter to the youth of the world, “*Dilecti Amici*,” he insisted on the vital need for youth to be close to God. Reflecting on the example of the young man in the Gospel who asked Jesus what he needed to do to gain eternal life (Mark 10:17–21) St. John Paul II observed that today the equivalent question could be thus framed: “How must I act so that my life will have meaning and value?”<sup>1</sup> Under his papacy the first World Youth Day was celebrated in 1986. The difference with his Papacy is that, he often spoke directly and lovingly to the youth in his letters and talks, urging them to give their lives to God and to never give up hope. “Always be prepared to make a defence... for the hope that is in you.”<sup>2</sup> This was the verse of scripture that St. John Paul II chose to begin his 1985 apostolic letter *Dilecti amici*.

In this apostolic letter, he described the Church as “the custodian of fundamental truths and values” and also as “the minister of the eternal destinies that...the great human family have in God himself.” By participating in the Church experience through youth events (like World Youth Day), young people have an experience of faith and communion, “which will help them to face the profound questions of life and to responsibly assume his or her place in society and in the ecclesial community.”<sup>3</sup>

Youth itself, the Pope proposed, is not merely “personal property” for the young, but rather is a “special possession belonging to everyone” that youth have a responsibility to share. Youth “is a possession of humanity itself,” the Pope said<sup>4</sup>. Adults hold ultimate responsibility for the present reality, but young people are the ones responsible for shaping the future. “You belong to the future, just as the future belongs to you.”<sup>5</sup>

Pope John Paul II frequently explains vocations by drawing on the vocation of Prophet Jeremiah, which the Pope calls a “universal model”<sup>6</sup> for every vocation. God’s word comes to Jeremiah and announces to him: „Before I formed

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to Youth, *Dilecti Amici*, No.9.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Letter to Youth, *Dilecti Amici*, No. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to Youth, *Dilecti Amici*, No.2.

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Youth, *Dilecti Amici*, No. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Letter to Youth, *Dilecti Amici*, No. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Letter to Youth, *Dilecti Amici*, No. 2.

you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations” (Jer. 1:5). Thus, begins a dialogue between God and Jeremiah. The Pope uses this description of Jeremiah’s calling to illustrate the way God calls each person. “The Lord tells the Prophet Jeremiah that his vocation was part of God’s eternal plan even before he was born. These words remind us that each person has a place in God’s plan and that each of us should carefully listen to God’s voice in prayer in order to discover the special calling we have received in Christ.”<sup>7</sup>

The main focus of the XV Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> October 2018) was on Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment. This shows how the issue of young people and vocational discernment is very important in the Church. The Assembly began on October 3 (2018), with over 300 participants. Synod delegates from around the world, including 36 young people, bishops, members of the Roman Curia and representatives of various religious orders, discussed issues related to young people and the Church such as vocational discernment, the transmission of the faith and how the Church can more effectively engage with young people. Through the Synod, the Church fulfilled St. John Paul II’s belief in young people’s important role in the Church and in the world.<sup>8</sup>

In the prologue of his biographical account of Pope John Paul II, Weigel made the following comments; “the pontificate of Pope John Paul II has been one of the most important in centuries, for the church and for the world. Some would argue that John Paul II has been the most consequential pope since the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in the sixteenth century. As that period defined the Catholic Church’s relationship to an emerging modern world, so the Second Vatican Council and the pontificate of John Paul II have laid down a set of markers that will likely determine the course of the Church well beyond “modernity” and into the third millennium of Christian history.”<sup>9</sup> This is made even more evident by the Pope’s involvement with the young people in the whole world.

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<sup>7</sup> Homily, September 2, 1990, 2

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Bolin, *Paths of Love: The Discernment of Vocation According to Aquinas, Ignatius, and John Paul II*, North Charleston 2008, Create Space Independent Publishing Platform.

<sup>9</sup> G. Weigel, *Witness to hope: The biography: Pope John Paul II*, New York 2001, Harper Collins, p. 4.

For Pope John Paul II, vocation is fundamentally something personal that takes place between a person and God. Yet there is still a certain „objectivity” to vocation; for being a human person means being oriented to the truth, and truth is objective. There is no one among us who does not have a divine vocation!”<sup>10</sup> Some are called audibly by God, but the usual kind of call is internal, through the inner working of the Spirit. „What is a vocation? It is an interior call of grace, which falls into the soul like a seed, to mature within it.”<sup>11</sup>

We cannot give an everywhere valid account of how a vocation takes place, since „apart from the universal elements that are found in every vocation, each call takes place concretely in ways that are always new and always different – and let us add, always beautiful and wonderful, because God is always wonderful in all that he does.”<sup>12</sup> But we can give a general picture, as the Pope does in several places.

John Paul II in PDV affirms that the discernment of vocations is not simply a venerable tradition. Now, more than ever, it is a central preoccupation of the Church. The discernment of vocations has been a recurring issue ever since the Church came into being. Bearing in mind Christ’s words; “it was not you that chose me, it was I that chose you” (Jn. 15:16), the apostles were concerned, at the very first election from among the members of the Church, to make that the man replacing Judas should be the Lord’s chosen one.<sup>13</sup>

All of us can and should pray for vocations, but that is not enough. Vocations must be discerned and promoted. Two significant places where this happens are the family and the parish. This study therefore will be very useful for the family and parishes in helping the young people discern their vocations. Every Catholic shares the responsibility to encourage young men and women to at least think about the possibility that God might be calling some of them to give their lives to Christ and to the building of the Kingdom of God in this way.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Homily, June 1, 1982.

<sup>11</sup> Angelus message, December 14, 1980.

<sup>12</sup> Homily, September 7, 1986.

<sup>13</sup> John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (I will give you Shepherds), Nairobi 1992, Paulines Publications (Ch. 1).

<sup>14</sup> John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (I will give you Shepherds), Nairobi 1992, Paulines Publications (Ch. 1).

## 2. Pope John Paul II and Young People

Pope John Paul II ignited a rapport with young people in the early years of his papacy. For example, on his first visit to the United States in October 1979, he wooed tens of thousands of teenagers at Madison Square Garden in New York City. With school bands blaring popular music, he rode the “pope mobile” up and down the aisles, greeting the kids and touching their outstretched hands. A riot of cheers echoed in the hall. At one point the youth began to chant “John Paul II, we love you!” The pope, smiling broadly, responded with, “woo-hoo-woo, John Paul II, he loves you.”<sup>15</sup> This cheer sums up one reason why young people rallied around him: He won their affection because they could feel his love for them.<sup>16</sup>

Karol Wojtyła discovered his charism for relating to youth early in his priesthood. He served as a chaplain to university students in Kraków. He invited these young men and women to join him at weekday Masses, gave them conferences, and took them hiking and kayaking. Gradually, an informal community of young people formed around the future pope, sharing their lives with him. He was able to lead them to Christ and help them develop a modern Catholic lifestyle. He called this group his “Środowisko,” which meant his “accompaniment,” and they became his lifelong friends. As Pope John Paul II looked back on the days of his Środowisko, his vision for World Youth Days was born. He realized that if he could accompany a small group of university students, he could also accompany the youth of the world and become their friend.<sup>17</sup>

In 1985 a quarter million young people gathered around him in Rome, and youth in dioceses throughout the world celebrated the first official World Youth Day (WYD) in 1986. Then the pope invited youth biennially to WYDs with him at international sites, beginning in 1987 at Buenos Aires. In alternate years, dioceses everywhere sponsored WYDs. Millions of young people from all over the world attended these joyous international celebrations. In fact, the closing Mass of the 1995 WYD in Manila drew five to seven million people, probably the largest gathering in human history.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> B.Ghezzi, *Saints at Heart*, Toronto2011, Loyola Press.

<sup>16</sup> B.Ghezzi, *Saints at Heart*, Toronto2011, Loyola Press.

<sup>17</sup> B.Ghezzi, *Saints at Heart*, Toronto2011, Loyola Press.

<sup>18</sup> B.Ghezzi, *Saints at Heart*, Toronto2011, Loyola Press.

His message for the 1995 WYD typified his approach to young people. First, he reminded them that the Lord had touched their lives and urged them to continue to seek him in earnest prayer. Then he called on them to collaborate with him in proclaiming the gospel: “You, young people, are especially called to become missionaries of this New Evangelization, by daily witnessing to the Word that saves. You personally experience the anxieties of the present historical period, fraught with hope and doubt, in which it can at times be easy to lose the way that leads to the encounter with Christ... The Church entrusts to young people the task of proclaiming to the world the joy which springs from having met Christ. Dear friends, allow yourselves to be drawn to Christ, accept his invitation to follow him. Go and preach the Good News that redeems; do it with happiness in your hearts and become communicators of hope in a world which is often tempted to despair, communicators of faith in a society which at times seems resigned to disbelief, communicators of love, in daily events that are often marked by a mentality of the most unbridled selfishness.”<sup>19</sup>

With such heart-to-heart communication, the pope created a dynamic friendship with millions of youth. Few if any of us will have opportunities to influence so many people for Christ and the Church. But John Paul II’s example teaches us the important lesson that making friends is the prerequisite to all evangelization.

### 3. Discerning Vocation

The history of every Christian vocation is the history of an inexpressible dialogue between God and human beings, between the love of God who calls and the freedom of individuals who respond lovingly to him. These two indivisible aspects of vocation, God’s gratuitous gift and the responsible freedom of human beings, are reflected in a splendid and very effective way in the brief words with which the evangelist Mark presents the calling of the Twelve: Jesus “went up into the hills, and called to him those whom he desired; and they came to him” (Mk. 3:13). On the one hand, we have the completely free decision of Jesus; on the other, the “coming” of the Twelve, their “following” Jesus.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> B. Ghezzi, *Saints at Heart*, Toronto 2011, Loyola Press.

<sup>20</sup> *Dei Verbum*, No. 36.

But is a vocation to be decided by prayer alone? Or does „listening to God’s voice in prayer” mean an introverted examination of our experiences of prayer? No, for „in many other ways too we learn to know God’s will: through important events in our lives, through the example and wisdom of others, and through the prayerful judgment of his Church.”<sup>21</sup> All that we learn of ourselves, and of the world in which we live can inform this decision. In his letter to youth for the „International Year of Youth,” the pope describes the process by which God’s call becomes the plan or path for a person’s life: “We could speak here of the „life” vocation, which in a way is identical with that plan of life which each of you draws up in the period of your youth... This „plan” is a ”vocation” inasmuch as in it there make themselves felt the various factors which call. These factors usually make up a particular order of values (also called a ”hierarchy of values”), from which emerges an ideal to be realized, an ideal which is attractive to a young heart. In this process the „vocation” becomes a ”plan,” and the plan begins to be also a vocation.”<sup>22</sup> “...During youth a person puts the question, „What must I do?” not only to himself and to other people from whom he can expect an answer, especially his parents and teachers, but he puts it also to God, as his Creator and Father. He puts it in the context of this particular interior sphere in which he has learned to be in a close relationship with God, above all in prayer. He therefore asks God: „What must I do?,” what is your plan for my life? Your creative, fatherly plan? What is your will? I wish to do it.”<sup>23</sup>

In this context the „plan” takes on the meaning of a ”life vocation,” as something which is entrusted by God to an individual as a task. Young people, looking insidethemselves and at the same time entering into conversation with Christ in prayer, desire, as it were, to read the eternal thought which God the Creator and Father has in their regard. They then become convinced that the task assigned to them by God is left completely to their own freedom, and at the same time, is determined by various circumstances of an interior and exterior nature. Examining these circumstances, the young person, boy or girl, constructs his or her plan of life and at the same time recognizes this plan as the vocation to which God is calling him or her.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Homily*, September 2, 1990.

<sup>22</sup> *Homily*, September 2, 1990.

<sup>23</sup> Letter to Youth, *Dilecti Amici*, No. 9.

<sup>24</sup> Letter to Youth, *Dilecti Amici*, No. 9.

The pope thus describes vocation as depending on what we might call „objective” circumstances, both interior and exterior. „[Their task] is determined by various circumstances of an interior and exterior nature.” These circumstances vary from individual to individual, and a complete description cannot be given. Yet the primary factor can be summed up with a single word – *love*. „Love is the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being,”<sup>25</sup> and thus having a vocation means being drawn by love and in love to commit oneself to a way of life.

Vocational discernment is not accomplished in a single act, even if, in recounting the development of a vocation, identifying specific moments or decisive encounters is possible. As for all important things in life, vocational discernment is a long process unfolding over time, during which one continues to monitor the signs used by the Lord to indicate and specify a vocation that is very personal and unique. The discernment of vocations is not simply a venerable tradition either. Now, more than ever, it is a central preoccupation of the Church.<sup>26</sup>

Vocational discernment is the process by which a person makes fundamental choices, in dialogue with the Lord and listening to the voice of the Spirit, starting with the choice of one’s state in life. The three verbs in *Evangelii Gaudium*, #51, used to describe discernment, namely, “to recognize,” “to interpret” and “to choose,” can be of assistance in mapping out a suitable itinerary for individuals or groups and communities, fully aware that, in practice, the boundaries in the different phases are never clearly delineated.<sup>27</sup>

In furthering vocational discernment Pope John Paul II affirms that, in discernment, and throughout the entire process of formation for ministry, the Church is moved by two concerns: to safeguard the good of her own mission and, at the same time, the good of the candidates. In fact, every Christian vocation, along with a Christological dimension, has an essentially ecclesial dimension: “Not only does it derive ‘from’ the Church and her mediation, not only does it come to be known and find fulfilment ‘in’ the Church, but it also necessarily appears – in fundamental service to God – as a service ‘to’ the Church. Christian vocation, whatever shape it takes, is a gift whose purpose is to build up the Church and to increase the kingdom of God in the world.”<sup>28</sup> Vocation as a gift therefore, must be nurtured with care by those entrusted by the Church.

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<sup>25</sup> *Familiaris Consortio*, No. 11.

<sup>26</sup> *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Ch. 1.

<sup>27</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 51.

<sup>28</sup> *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Ch. 1.



#### 4. Pastores Dabo Vobis the roles of different groups involved in vocational discernment

**Young People:** According to *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (#65–68), without exception in pastoral activity, young people are not objects but agents. Oftentimes, society sees them as non-essential or inconvenient. The Church cannot reflect such an attitude, because all young people, without exception, have the right to be guided in life's journey. Consequently, each community is called to be attentive to young people, especially those who are experiencing poverty, marginalization or exclusion and lead them to become involved in life. The Church herself is called to learn from young people. Many Saints among youth give shining testimony to this fact and continue to be an inspiration for everyone.<sup>29</sup>

**Community:** The entire Christian community should feel the responsibility of educating new generations. In fact, many Christians involved in this work deserve recognition, beginning with those who have assumed this responsibility within ecclesial life. The efforts of those who bear testimony every day to the goodness of the Gospel life and the joy that flows from it should equally be admired.<sup>30</sup>

**People of Reference:** The role of credible adults and their cooperation is basic in the course of human development and vocational discernment. This requires authoritative believers, with a clear human identity, a strong sense of belonging to the Church, a visible spiritual character, a strong passion for education and a great capacity for discernment. Sometimes, however, unprepared and immature adults tend to act in a possessive and manipulative manner, creating negative dependencies, severe disadvantage and serious counter-witness, which can even intensify to the level of abuse.<sup>31</sup>

**Parents and Family:** The irreplaceable educational role played by parents and other family members needs to be acknowledged in every Christian community. In the first place, parents in families express each day God's care for every human being through a love which binds them to each other and to their children. In this regard, Pope Francis has offered valuable information in a specific chapter on the subject in *Amoris Laetitia* (#259–290).<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Ch. 1.

<sup>30</sup> *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Ch. 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Ch. 1.

<sup>32</sup> *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Ch. 1.

Shepherds of Souls: Meetings with pastoral agents, who have the ability of a genuine involvement with youth by dedicating their time and resources, and consecrated women and men through their unselfish witness, are decisive in the growth of new generations. In this regard, Pope Francis said: “I ask this especially of the Pastors of the Church, the Bishops and the Priests: you are the ones principally responsible for Christian and priestly vocations and this task cannot be relegated to a bureaucratic office. You too have experienced an encounter that changed your life, when another priest – a parish priest, a confessor, a spiritual director – helped you experience the beauty of God’s love. Thus, you too: going out, listening to young people – it takes patience! – You can help them understand the movements of their heart and guide their steps” (Pope Francis’ address to Participants in the International Conference on Pastoral Work for Vocations, 21 October 2016).<sup>33</sup>

Teachers and Other Persons in Education: Many Catholic teachers are involved as witnesses in universities and schools in every grade and level. Many are also ardently and competently involved in the workplace. Still other believers are engaged in civil life, attempting to be the leaven for a more just society. Many engaged in volunteer work devote their time for the common good and the care of creation. A great many are enthusiastically and generously involved in free-time activities and sports. All of these people bear witness to the human and Christian vocation which is accepted and lived with faithfulness and dedication, arousing in those who see them a desire to do likewise. Consequently, responding generously to one’s proper vocation is the primary way of performing pastoral vocational work.<sup>34</sup>

## 5. Challenges in Vocational Discernment

The vocational scenario is making drastic geographic shifts in the universal church which raise hopes and at the same time pose new challenges. There is greater awareness in the Church of the importance of vocational discernment adapted to the changes in the church and the society.

The preparatory document for the 2018 Synod on the Youth (*Instrumentum Laboris*), affirms that today’s generation of young people live in a world

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<sup>33</sup> *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Ch. 1.

<sup>34</sup> *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Ch. 1.

which is different from that of their parents and educators. Economic and social changes have affected the gamut of obligations and opportunities. Young people's aspirations, needs, feelings and manner of relating to others have changed as well. Furthermore, from a certain point of view, young people, because of globalization, tend to be more homogeneous in all parts of the world. Nevertheless, they remain in their local surroundings and their unique cultural and institutional settings, which have repercussions in the process of socializing and forming a personal identity.<sup>35</sup>

The challenge of multi-culturalism is present in a special way in the world of young people. The economic and social hardship of families, the way in which young people adopt certain characteristics of contemporary culture becomes a major challenge. The impact of new technologies, on the other hand, requires a major responsibility in responding. This is the educational emergency highlighted by Pope Benedict XVI in his Letter to the City and the Diocese of Rome on the Urgency of Educating Young People (21 January, 2008). On the global level, inequalities between countries need to be taken into account together with their effect on the opportunities offered to young people. Furthermore, cultural and religious factors can lead to exclusion by, for example, gender inequality or discrimination against ethnic or religious minorities, which drive the most enterprising among the young to revert to emigration.<sup>36</sup>

The global village of interdependence and diversity is evident every day. The increasingly multicultural and interreligious character of cities and neighbourhoods is evident in our societies. We are all challenged to meet and embrace diversity. Spiritual directors are not exempt from these experiences since they accompany or are accompanied by those diverse in culture, religion, gender, race and ethnic background, sexual identity, economic class, and age cohort.<sup>37</sup>

Merton in his book *"Spiritual Direction & Meditation"*, highlights the importance of spiritual direction in vocational discernment. He, however, notes the challenges that may arise. He writes: Some people lament the fact that they cannot find a suitable director.<sup>38</sup> It takes courage to face oneself in the presence of another person. But this is needed to advance in the spiritual life. Youth shy

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<sup>35</sup> *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Ch. 1.

<sup>36</sup> *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Ch. 1.

<sup>37</sup> *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Ch. 1.

<sup>38</sup> T. Merton, *Spiritual Direction & Meditation*, Collegeville Minnesota 1960, The Order of St. Benedict, Inc., p.30.

off from sharing their experiences to the clergy and the religious. A major challenge for the directee is self-knowledge and self-awareness. This is a constant topic in the literature of the Christian spiritual tradition and other religious traditions. Augustine of Hippo prayed, “O unchanging God, this is my prayer: let me know myself and let me know you.” Teresa of Avila wrote often of the importance of self-knowledge as the foundation of the life of prayer.<sup>39</sup>

Questions that facilitate this self-knowledge and self-awareness are these: Who am I? What is my cultural background, my religion, my racial and ethnic identity? What does it mean for me to be a woman, man, heterosexual, single, married? What generational age cohort do I belong to, and how does it shape my worldview? How does my economic class inform my choices? Some directors have lived all their lives in one culture, while others have moved in and out of various cultures, learning new languages and world views. Geertz asserts that “there is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture.”<sup>40</sup> The ideas, values, convictions, ways of organizing life are all human creations; they were shaped at some historical moment, evolve, and change.

## 6. Strategies in Responding to the Challenges of Vocational Discernment

According to *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (#38–40) a vocation is a fathomless mystery involving the relationship established by God with human beings in their absolute uniqueness, a mystery perceived and heard as a call which awaits a response in the depths of one’s conscience, which is “a person’s most secret core and sanctuary. There, one is alone with God whose voice echoes in his “depths” (106). But this does not eliminate the communitarian, and in particular, the ecclesial dimension of vocation. The Church is also truly present and at work in the vocation of every priest.<sup>41</sup>

The Church should daily take up Jesus’ persuasive and demanding invitation to “pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Mt. 9:38). Obedient to Christ’s command, the Church, first of all makes a humble profession

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<sup>39</sup> K. Kavanaugh, *Teresa of Avila, The Interior Castle, Classics of Western Spirituality*, Mahwah 1979, Paulist Press.

<sup>40</sup> C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York 1973, Basic Books, p.49.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*.

of faith. In praying for vocations, conscious of her urgent need of them for her very life and mission, she acknowledges that they are a gift of God and, as such, must be asked for by a ceaseless and trusting prayer of petition. This prayer, the pivot of all pastoral work for vocations, is required, not only of individuals but of entire ecclesial communities.

In addition, the liturgy, as the summit and source of the Church's existence, and in particular, of all Christian prayer, plays an influential and indispensable role in the pastoral work of promoting vocations. The liturgy is a living experience of God's gift and a great school for learning how to respond to his call. As such, every liturgical celebration, and especially the Eucharist, reveals to us the true face of God and grants us a share in the paschal mystery, in the "hour" for which Jesus came into the world and toward which he freely and willingly made his way in obedience to the Father's call (Jn. 13:1). It shows us the Church as a priestly people and a community structured in the variety and complementarity of its charisms and vocations.<sup>42</sup>

In carrying out her educational role, the Church aims with special concern at developing in children, adolescents, and young men a desire and a will to follow Jesus Christ in a total and attractive way. This educational work, while addressed to the Christian community as such, must also be aimed at the individual person. Indeed, God with his call reaches the call of each individual, and the Spirit, who abides deep within each disciple (1 Jn. 3:24), gives himself to each Christian with different charisms and special signs. Each one, therefore, must be helped to embrace the gift entrusted to him as a completely unique person, and to hear the words which the Spirit of God personally addresses to him.<sup>43</sup>

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

<sup>42</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, No.10.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*.

of strength of spirit and a capacity for concern, for compassion, for genuine openness to others, for love.”<sup>44</sup>

Dioceses should view the ministry of spiritual direction as valid and necessary, and should be committed to the on-going training courses and support of all who offer the ministry of spiritual direction. This ministry will not only offer solutions to our subject of study, but also be part of pastoral care to all the Christian faithful. Consequently, the laity should be enlightened on what spiritual direction is and its importance in their spiritual maturity. Spiritual direction is a vital element within the overall life and ministry of the Diocese and of the Church. It is important that this ministry is made more widely accessible and known to all.<sup>45</sup>

From pastoral point of view, the Christian youth of today must not only be taught God’s word, but they must be mentored in ways to apply the word to their lives. They must be inspired to live more like Christ, remembering Jesus is the model (Lk. 2:48–52). Training youth in what it means to be excellent will equip and inspire them to be excellent leaders in the future. Christian youth must be taught *how to be doers of the word* (James 1:21–26) not just how to come and sit and audit the Bible classes and training sessions. Youth need to be taught how to set and reach meaningful spiritual goals.

Lippman asserts that, mentoring programs are especially important for life-skills development. Soft life-skills “refer to a broad set of skills, competencies, behaviours, attitudes, and personal qualities that enable people to actively navigate their environment, work well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals”. These skills can be as important as academic and technical achievements. Some of the key soft skills for youth workforce success are communication, self-control, positive self-concept, and higher-order thinking skills. This is consequently true in spiritual mentorship and spiritual direction especially in vocational discernment.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Homily at the Beginning of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome*, 19 March 2013.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*.

<sup>46</sup> L.H. Lippman, R. Ryberg, R. Carney & K.A. Moore, *Key “Soft Skills” that Foster Youth Workforce Success: Toward a Consensus Across Fields*, Bethesda 2015, Child Trends.

## 7. Conclusion

Authentic discernment is a spiritual insight aided by grace, closely akin to wisdom. It involves making the right choices, listening to our inner selves and paying attention to the movements that arise within us. Christian Vocation is not a fruit of wilful or rational thinking; it comes from listening to one's life and searching deep into our interior motives. Discernment is "the interior search for an answer to the question of one's vocation, namely, determining whether God is calling one to the married life, single life, consecrated life, ordained ministry or any other calling".<sup>47</sup> Discernment is a faith rooted experience which consists of "discovering God's direction and guidance in the concrete reality of our day-to-day lives."<sup>48</sup> An interior voice invites one to follow as it leads towards a sense of meaning and purpose.

Vocational discernment and nurturing must be gradual. Not everyone matures in the same way and according to the same pattern. The intention should be to offer a path which is, at the same time, progressive and cumulative, in which a definite decision is made at every step, while remaining open to continual growth.

The Pope, at the close of his letter, *Dilecti Amici*, encourages young people to ask difficult questions in their pursuit of the truth. "My hope for you, young people is that your 'growth in stature and in wisdom' will come about through contact with nature. Make time for this! Do not miss it! Accept too the fatigue and effort that this contact sometimes involves, especially when we wish to attain particularly challenging goals. Such fatigue is creative, and also constitutes the element of healthy relaxation which is as necessary as study and work."

Finally, the Pope concluded the letter by saying "I repeat these words of the Mother of God and I address them to you, to each one of you young people: 'Do whatever Christ tells you.'"<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> C. Ezeani, *When You Leave Religious Life, What Then?*, "Religious Life Review" (2017), 55 (300), pp. 275–297.

<sup>48</sup> C.J. Jackson, *Vocations and Vocation Discernment*, "Review for Religious" (2004) 63 (3), pp. 305–315.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. *Dilecti Amici*.

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