

## **What Catholic Young People Really Want to Talk About?**

Joseph Healey, MM

Pope Francis' challenge to bishops and other leaders in the Catholic Church is loud and clear: Be a "Listening Church" first and a "Teaching Church" second. What if we took his advice seriously in relation to young people<sup>1</sup> in the Catholic Church. What if we really listened to youth and young adults – their concerns, needs, doubts, questions, criticisms, burning issues, hopes and dreams. Here are some concrete examples of what Catholic young people really want to talk about in their distinct peer groups without parents, teachers and church leaders present.

### **1. Youth Small Christian Communities (YSCCs) – a New Pastoral Strategy in Eastern Africa**

In recent years we have struggled with the exodus of many young people from the Catholic Church in Eastern Africa (and around the world). The number of African "nones" is growing. Catholic young people are joining the Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches due their lively singing, dancing and participation. In addition, a survey was done in Nairobi, Kenya on where to find young Catholics on Sunday morning. The results: "You do not find them outside of church after mass. You find them on social media."

When asked, young people said that the normal weekly adult Small Christian Communities (SCCs) were dull and boring. "Too much talk. We want a variety of activities." Due to African cultural traditions, African youth normally do not speak in public in front of adults. So, youth do not usually actively participate in adult SCCs in Eastern Africa. If there are no prayers and religious activities in a family and the parents do not participate in the weekly SCCs meetings, then the youth don't see the importance of SCCs.

Thus, it is crucial to form specific Youth Small Christian Communities (YSCCs in short) that give young people a specific voice and role and encourage them to plan their own discussions, reflections and activities. The rapid growth of YSCCs has been a new pastoral

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<sup>1</sup> Terminology varies according to the place and context. In general, "young people" is the umbrella word that covers "youth" (often referring to teenagers and those in high school) and "young adults" (after college in their 20s). The Synod of Bishops in Rome in 2018 is treating the lives, attitudes, and concerns of 16 to 29-year-olds around the world. In Swahili, the main language of Eastern Africa, *vijana* (often translated as "youth") covers the 16 to 35 age bracket.

strategy in Eastern Africa<sup>2</sup> within the overall key pastoral priority of Small Christian Communities in AMECEA.<sup>3</sup>

One model is Christ the King Parish, Kibera in Nairobi Archdiocese. In the Parish Center and in each outstation the youth form separate Youth SCCs. For example, around 25 youth at the Parish Center are members of St. John Bosco SCC. Filipino Comboni seminarian Caspis Jemboy, MCCJ reports:

Each Sunday of the month has its schedule for an activity. Such activities in SCC are: *Bible* Sharing (once a month); Meetings and Planning; Seminars on Justice and Peace including Ethnic Identity; Recollection or Retreat; Outreach Program for the poor and Catechism (once a month). For the past months and weeks [in 2013], concentration was made on the focus of rights, justice and peace in political and social responsibilities...The youth themselves are enthusiastic in promulgating what is good and better for everyone, starting from family, community and society as a whole. Despite their different ethnic [formerly called “tribes”] identities, they hope for change and transformation towards a better way of life and participate in eradicating ethnicity conflict. The whole parish and other organizations are very supportive in helping the young people for their vision and mission for the betterment of the family, community, church, and society as a whole.<sup>4</sup>

The Fish Youth Group was founded in 1985 in Kisumu City, Kenya by two Catholic missionaries, English Mill Hill Missionary Father Anthony Chantry MHM and American Sister of Notre Dame Sister Mary Ellen Howard SND. Their main goal was to bring the Catholic youth together to strengthen their common faith, become strong members of the church and grow into responsible adults. The group was officially

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<sup>2</sup>This is documented in Chapter 13 on “Tracking the Growth of Youth Small Christian Communities (YSCCs)” in the free, online Ebook Joseph Healey, *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa* [http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/images/stories/pdf/Build\\_new.pdf](http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/images/stories/pdf/Build_new.pdf)

<sup>3</sup>AMECEA is an acronym for "Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa." It is a service organization for the National Episcopal Conferences of the nine English-speaking countries of Eastern Africa, namely Eritrea (1993), Ethiopia (1979), Kenya (1961), Malawi (1961), South Sudan (2011), Sudan (1973), Tanzania (1961), Uganda (1961) and Zambia (1961). The Republic of South Sudan became independent on 9 July, 2011, but the two Sudans remain part of one Episcopal Conference. Somalia (1995) and Djibouti (2002) are Affiliate Members. AMECEA is one of the eight Regional Episcopal Conferences of [SECAM](#) (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar).

<sup>4</sup>Caspis Jemboy, "Missionary Life and Outreach of SCCs in Africa and around the World," Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website, retrieved on the on 28 April, 2013 at: <http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org/africa/kenya/237-missionary-life-and-outreach-of-sccs-in-africa-and-around-the-world.html>

launched on 21 April, 1985 when the first 22 trained youth leaders were sent out, two by two (like the 12 apostles) to start their small groups following the SCCs Model of Church. The Fish Group was founded on the principles of Small Christian Communities. The motto of the group is SHARING which enables the members to grow and nourish their faith by encouraging each other to be faithful to God as they share continuously. At least here in their small communities, the youth have church groups that they can call their own.

Today after 30 years of existence the Fish Group is very active. First, Fish members hear the Word of God. By sharing and answering questions, they find out how to apply it to our daily lives. Second, they do a group action to serve the local communities especially by helping the poor, the sick, the elderly and the suffering. Third, they arrange social and educational activities for the group such as sports, music, seminars/trainings, etc.<sup>5</sup>

An interesting Case Study is St. Clement's Youth SCC in Mary Immaculate Parish in Lusaka Archdiocese, Zambia. The parish has 11 SCCs that meet twice a month as the Adults SCC and twice a month as the Youth SCC. Our SCC team participated in a meeting on Sunday, 1 December, 2013 in the home of two of the youth. The 13 SCC members included seven young women and six young men. In a frank discussion members said that many Catholic youth find the Adult SCCs boring because the *Bible* Sharing is long and heavy. The meetings become too dull and routine. They mentioned that many youths are attracted to the singing, dancing and liveliness of Pentecostal worship services in Zambia. They urged Eastern African SCCs to use creative ways of reflecting on the *Bible*<sup>6</sup> and applying it to our everyday life. They used an exercise starting with a reading of *John* 14:15-17. Then participants spontaneously drew out of a basket questions written on slips of paper related to friends and relationships. After a period of quiet reflection each SCC member answered his or her question from their personal experience. An example: "Do you rely on your good friends in time of troubles and problems? One answer used the saying *Friends in need are friends indeed*.

Then St. Clement's Youth SCC discussed general issues including plans for the annual Christmas party; a new self-reliance project and a charity outreach in January, 2014 – to buy foodstuffs and gifts to take to a hospice of disabled children. As a self-reliance project, they made bookmarks with *Bible* verses in different languages such as Nyanja, English, etc.

## **2. Design of Listening Sessions of Young People**

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<sup>5</sup> Based on "The Fish Group Profile." Retrieved on 26 December, 2017, The Fish Group Blogspot, <http://fygroup.blogspot.co.ke>

<sup>6</sup> Creative *Bible* Sharing/*Bible* Reflection can include: dramatic reading of the *Bible* text chosen. Acting out/dramatizing the *Bible* text chosen. Playing a DVD/Video version or audio version of the *Bible* text chosen.

After consulting many young people, we came up with a format for listening sessions of 10-15 young people, especially college students. We spent a lot of time on our process and group dynamics. When I asked a student coordinator what is the most important part of the session, she immediately answered: “food.” Another student used a mantra *Feed them and they will come*. So, at different sessions we always started with pizza or lasagna or tasty sandwiches. We tried to model being a Small Christian Community by sitting around in the circle. Since some of the students were not going to church any more (“nones”), we did not have an opening prayer or a churchy setting.

The format was as follows:

1. Ice breaker: each student gave his or her name and said one thing about himself/herself that was of interest to the others present (a favorite hobby or something the student was passionate about<sup>7</sup>).

2. Read Pope Francis’ invitation to young people in preparation for the October, 2018 Synod of Bishops on “Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment” including: “The Catholic Church also wishes to listen to your voice, your sensitivities and your faith; even your doubts and your criticism. Make your voice heard, let it resonate in communities and let it be heard by your shepherds of souls.”

3. Opening round: “If you could sit down and have a one-one-conversation with Pope Francis himself, what would you say to him. For you what is one strength and one weakness of the Catholic Church.” After a minute of reflective silence, we went around the room – each speaking for no more than one minute.

4. Free and open-ended dialog and discussion.

5. At the end: invite participants to suggest a “take away.”

Our survey has been more qualitative than quantitative. After listening to hundreds of students especially in Eastern Africa and the USA, we found three broad categories of comments and feelings:

1. About their personal lives.

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<sup>7</sup> I fully participated in these sessions equally with the students. To explain why a 79 years old American missionary priest would be interested in these listening sessions, I told this story. I teach at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa in Nairobi, Kenya. In the first class the students started calling me *Mzee* (the Swahili word for “elder”) as a title of respect. But I said, “No. Not yet. Please give me another name.” So the next day they started calling me “a youth from a long ago.” I like that a lot better. At Loyola University in New Orleans I said that I was passionate about fair-trade goods such as coffee, tea and chocolate that gave the local growers especially in the Global South a fair percentage of the profit. Suddenly, and to my surprise, all the students clapped, by snapping their fingers together.

2. About the Catholic Church.
3. About society in general.

We found a dedicated group of young people on both ends of the spectrum: On the right young people are deeply spiritual (rosary, Eucharistic Adoration, practices of piety). An increasing number of student groups are evangelical Catholics. On the left young people are deeply involved in social justice, advocacy and service projects.

The hunger and desire are there. I participated in a Christian Life Community (CLC) meeting at Santa Clara University. These were students eagerly exploring questions about God, their faith, and its relevance to their everyday lives. The fact that exams were starting the next day posed no deterrent to this weekly gathering of undergraduates who, judging from their sincerity and candor, took their religion quite seriously. As one young woman earnestly told the group, she needed this period of prayer, reflection and faith-sharing to “ground her” for the intellectual challenge and pressure she knew awaited her in the busy exam days ahead. Her fellow students nodded in appreciation.

### **3. Surveys Among Youth/Young People in Eastern Africa**

Our surveys and evaluations has studied carefully the important role of youth in SCCs.<sup>8</sup> Given the importance of youth in the demographics of both the general population and the Catholic population in Africa, the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the 2009 Second African Synod did not give enough attention to youth in Africa. A single section -- Number 27 -- in *Message of the Bishops of Africa to the People of God*— treats youth after priests, religious, lay faithful, Catholics in public life, families, women and men. It states: “You are not just the future of the Church: you are with us already in big numbers. In many countries of Africa, over 60% of the population is under 25. The ratio in the Church would not be much different.” But the message could have said much more. *Proposition 48* treats youth in a problem-centered way saying that the Synod Fathers “are deeply concerned about the plight of youth” and proposes various recommendations. Much more could have been said about the great potential of young people in the Catholic Church and in the general society in Africa.

The Apostolic Exhortation *Africa’s Commitment* is more positive and expansive. Especially in Number 63 on “Young People” the pope encourages young people to “active and

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<sup>8</sup> Our SCCs Website (<http://www.smallchristiancommunities.org>) has a user-friendly Search Feature. A Search on 23 December, 2017 shows: If you search for “youth” you get 51 hits (visits). If you search for “young people” you get 39 hits. If you search for “young adults” you get 13 hits.

enthusiastic participation in ecclesial groups and movements. Cultivate a yearning for fraternity,<sup>9</sup> justice and peace...the future is in your hands.”<sup>10</sup>

A survey among young people in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, Lilongwe, Malawi, Lusaka, Zambia and Nairobi, Kenya between 2013-2017 revealed that their favorite discussion topics in their YSCCs meetings are:

1. Boy-girl relationships, sex,<sup>11</sup> sexuality, dating and peer pressure concerns.  
Kenyan layman Steven Juma says:

I spent a lot of time going to church, *jumuiya* (Swahili for “community”), fellowship and all kinds of Small Christian Communities where we talked about everything from feeding the poor to Jesus forgiving the prostitutes. We talked about everything but sex. Yet most of my Christian formation happened in a Small Christian Community... We have to talk about sex in an honest, candid way, and that talk has to start in our Small Christian Communities because we are not going to hear it at the 10.30 mass on Sunday.<sup>12</sup>

2. Another topic clustered around fashion, popular music, video games, social networks, information technology, sports and the use of leisure time.

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<sup>9</sup> Fraternity is a word that needs to be changed to inclusive (nonsexist) language like “brotherhood and sisterhood.” To 95% of the youth in the USA “fraternity” refers to the social club and residence for young men on college campuses. The equivalent for young women is “sorority.”

<sup>10</sup>To highlight the importance of young people in Africa we have produced the *2018 African Proverbs Calendar* on the theme “Youth/Young People.” The monthly African proverbs and sayings related to young people come from 13 African countries: Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Free download at: <http://www.afriprov.org>

<sup>11</sup> In our SCCs Class at Tangaza in March, 2016 the students (mostly seminarians) were reluctant to mention sex as one of the African youth’s most important favorite topics (as though it was not proper to discuss sex in public). Finally, the sole priest in the class said, “Let’s say it openly. Young people want to talk about sex.”

During research on university and college campuses in the USA, the topic “sex” was widened to include LGBTQ -- lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgendered, queer people.

<sup>12</sup> Steven Juma, St. Gonzaga Gonza SCC Youth Group Website, retrieved on 20 July, 2013, [https://www.Facebook.com/groups/gonzagagonzascc/494064024005727/?notif\\_t=group\\_comment\\_reply](https://www.Facebook.com/groups/gonzagagonzascc/494064024005727/?notif_t=group_comment_reply)

3. Whole area of searching for one's human and Christian identity and self- discovery in a faith-sharing context. What are youth's aspirations and dreams?<sup>13</sup> This includes vocational discernment (covering religious vocations and vocations in the secular world.) This touches career planning,<sup>14</sup> job hunting and the challenges of employment/unemployment.

4. Involvement in justice and peace issues including causes, service and outreach opportunities. In his research American theologian Father Bernard Lee, SM makes a valuable distinction that applies to YSCCs summarized as follows:

Full Christianhood is necessarily gathered and sent—community and mission belong together. I can say clearly that while traditional SCC members (the elder groups) do care about the shape of the world outside of their gathering, they tend to be more attentive to being gathered than to being sent (in mission). Some of us are guessing that for today's young adult Catholics, "sending" will attract attention sooner than "gathering." Young adults deserve some prioritized attention *vis-à-vis* their social agency in the world, and base communities are a way of connecting social agency with sound Christian hearts, heads, and feet.<sup>15</sup>

5. How to answer challenges from their Protestant friends especially Pentecostals on the *Bible*, Catholic Church teachings, etc. Recent research shows this is the main reason that African Catholic youth want to learn more about the *Bible*.

6. Fund raising projects (money). This included emphasis on long range goals and achievements and how to be financially successful in life.

7. Generation gap – communications problems between themselves and their parents.

8. Politics – always a fascinating topic especially connected to election time in African countries.

9. Culture including African ethnic group identity and challenges and pop

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<sup>13</sup> At a workshop at Kenyatta University in Nairobi, Kenya on Saturday, 5 November, 2016 the title of my interactive presentation was: "Positive Use of the Social Media: Suggestions on How Students at Kenyatta University Can Use Their Leisure Time Better." I began by asking the students in buzz groups of two each to discuss the question: "What gets me up in the morning?" "Why do I get up in the morning?" Then we shared our answers in the whole group of about 70 students.

<sup>14</sup> Research in USA indicate that university and college students and graduates also want to talk about how to pay off their student loans.

<sup>15</sup> Bernard Lee, "Young Adults Gathered & Sent or Sent & Gathered," in Moerschbacher, *Proceedings of the International Symposium*, pp. 2-3.

culture especially in cities.

#### **4. Surveys Among Youth/Young People in the USA**

From 2014 to 2017 I had the opportunity to meet, and learn from, students from the following campuses in the USA: Boston College, DePaul, Duquesne, Georgetown, Loyola New Orleans, Morgan State, Notre Dame, Princeton, Santa Clara, Stanford, Williams and Yale.<sup>16</sup>

Here are the results of two listening sessions in the USA:

**Georgetown University in Washington, DC, USA on 17 September, 2017** (eight men, three women)

1. Pope Francis' efforts to reach out to young people are very positive.
2. For many young people the "Institutional Church" is not welcoming and nourishing.
3. Many ask whether the official Catholic Church (that is, the Vatican and the bishops) really wants to listen to the concerns of young people such as the areas of sexuality, affectivity and personal relationships.
4. The strength and influence of our Catholic Social Teaching is undermined for young people by the Catholic Church's intransigence on the issues of women and LGBTQ.
5. We have a long way to go promote the empowerment of women in the Catholic Church.
6. Many college students are more conservative and simply not concerned about justice issues in the Catholic Church.
7. There is a real disconnect. Through Campus Ministry and other activities, a number of students find community at Georgetown, but then after graduation find nothing in their home parishes. So, they leave the university and end up in a place where there is no community of other young people with similar concerns within the Catholic Church.
8. Following the one hour listening session, three Georgetown students (one woman, two men) participated in a fruitful 40-minute Zoom Video Conference Call with young people from Mexico and India.<sup>17</sup> The students related to one another and recognized common themes in their respective concerns about the strengths and weaknesses of the Catholic Church.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See Healey, Joseph, "When It Comes to Nurturing Faith, Smaller Is Often Better" and "When Smaller is Better: Small Faith Communities and the Future of the U.S. Church," *America Magazine*, 24 May 2016, *America Media Website*, retrieved on 25 May, 2016, <http://americamagazine.org/issue/when-smaller-better>.

<sup>17</sup> This call was coordinated by Catholic Church Reform Int'l, a global network seeking reform of the Catholic Church.

<sup>18</sup> With thanks to Clyde Christofferson.

**NOTE:** As Moderator I invited the views of the students themselves without commenting myself. But three quarters through the session, I said, “There is an elephant in the room. There is an important topic you have not mentioned. What is it?” Immediately one student said, “sexuality.” Another said, “gay and lesbian issues.” This led to an animated 15-minute discussion.

**Loyola University in New Orleans, Louisiana, USA on 30 November, 2017** (six men, seven women)<sup>19</sup>

**Strengths in the Catholic Church:**

1. Service to others – regardless of faith – is given freely as a child of God.
2. The Catholic Church is unified and one. You are a part no matter where you are.
3. The Church is rooted in its traditions.
4. At its best, social justice is well lived out.
5. Good spiritual direction is offered when sought out. It’s a great home in Christ.
6. Catholic identity is strong here at Loyola and makes me feel included.
7. Pope Francis is simplifying difficult concepts and providing a welcoming environment.
8. New zeal for liturgy through youth choirs and glory/praise music.
9. Our Catholic men’s group focuses on the Theology of the Body.
10. Small faith communities are a safe place/real space to share our faith and reflect on our concerns.

**Weaknesses in the Catholic Church:**

1. The church is not meeting the needs of young people and understand the nuances of each generation.
2. Youth are looked down on and feel almost alienated. This misunderstanding is turning people away.
3. The connections to alienated people, specifically LGBTQ communities, need to be stronger.
4. We need to be attentive to the whole life ethic – it doesn’t need to just focus on abortion. Separation of faith from acts is found in politicians and others in the pew.
5. It’s hard to become Catholic – it excludes people.
6. People don’t feel included. We talk about reaching out to marginalized, but we don’t do it in practice.
7. Children and youth are THE Church, not the Future Church.
8. Church isn’t outspoken on mental health issues – we can’t talk about it. We need and want resources on dealing with it.
9. How do we address injustice and inequality locally and globally – it gets lost on parish levels.

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<sup>19</sup> It is noteworthy that five of these students belong to Christian Life Communities (CLCs) on campus.

10. Not enough focus on sacraments, especially with older clergy. People participate – they’re going through motions. Entering into Kingdom should be our first priority.
11. Mass can be boring – young people don’t feel included. It needs to be more personalized.

Recommendations:

1. Make the church more accessible and simplify the language to making the message more relatable.
2. Using social media more.
3. Follow up on the questions in our RCIA sessions. Face challenging questions about faith.
4. Where are the young people today? “I have no time” is not a good excuse. Mass is a sacrifice.
5. We have to respond to the changing role of women.
6. We need to deal with the stress of college life.
7. The Catholic Church must face issues of immigration/poverty/racism.
8. Make minorities feel comfortable in the Catholic Church.<sup>20</sup>

**NOTE:** Before the one hour listening session, there was a fruitful 40-minute Zoom Video Conference Call with young people from India, Kenya and Pakistan.

As another type of listening session our team<sup>21</sup> participated in three “Ecclesiology” classes of high school sophomores (15 and 16-year-old girls) at the Academy of the Sacred Heart in New Orleans on 27-28 November, 2017. While sitting in a circle and discussing our faith and life, we handed out a piece of paper and asked the students to write down a topic they would like to discuss in their peer groups – without teachers, parents and other adults present. Some topics they suggested (alphabetically):

1. Balancing church activities and other activities.
2. Body image and what beauty means. How to respect your body.
3. Handling rude adults.
4. Helping the needy.
5. How they can help the community as youth.
6. How to get closer to God.
7. How to make major decisions in life.
8. Impact God has on young people.
9. Peer pressure.
10. Personal Relationships.
11. Pressure of exams.
12. Service to others.

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<sup>20</sup> With thanks to Diane Blair.

<sup>21</sup> Father Lawrence Murori, a Kenyan priest, Mr. Alloys Nyakundi, a Kenyan layman and myself.

13. Time management.<sup>22</sup>

What was striking was how many students appreciated these listening sessions and being asked what they would like to talk about.

American Cardinal Donald Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington DC, USA wrote:

One of the most important elements of the preparation for this October, 2018 gathering was the call for listening sessions with young people throughout the world. “By listening to young people, the Catholic Church will once again hear the Lord speaking in today’s world,” explains the [Preparatory Document](#) for the Synod. “As in the days of Samuel (cf. [1 Samuel 3:1-21](#)) and Jeremiah (cf. [Jeremiah 1:4-10](#)), young people know how to discern the signs of our times, indicated by the Spirit. Listening to their aspirations, the Church can glimpse the world which lies ahead and the paths the Church is called to follow.”

In Washington Archdiocese, this took the form of listening sessions and an online survey. With this stage now completed, I want to express my gratitude for the more than 1,500 responses that were received in 40 parish listening sessions, with hundreds of young adults also participating online. The responses show some common areas of concern among young people:

1. Many young adults feel the pressures of a secularized world, particularly in the area of human sexuality, and a lack of community and authentic friendships in their lives.
2. Many young adults also feel the pressures of heavy debts and managing finances.
3. When asked to talk about where they find meaning in their lives, both Catholic and non-Catholics spoke of the importance of service experiences.
4. Among young people who make the Catholic Church a part of their life, they value the invitation and initiation into the experience of personal prayer and those adults who seem “authentic,” and also the opportunity they have for spiritual direction and help with discernment.<sup>23</sup>

Some Americans took part in a session in Rome: Twenty people under the age of 35, along with 70 theologians, priests and academics met 11-15 September, 2017 as part of the preparatory process for the 2018 Synod of Bishops. One report stated:

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<sup>22</sup>With thanks to Alloys Nyakundi.

<sup>23</sup> “A Listening Church and Helping Young People in Vocational Discernment,” -- A Blog by Cardinal Donald Wuerl, 10 June, 2017, retrieved on 20 September, 2017, <http://cardinalsblog.adw.org/2017/06/listening-church-helping-young-people-vocational-discernment>

Several young people who attending the seminar urged the Vatican and the bishops themselves to be open to listening to youth talk and ask questions about love, sex and sexuality. A "big gap" exists between the concerns young people want to talk about and the issues most bishops are comfortable discussing, said Therese Hargot, who describes herself as a philosopher and psychologist.

Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops, said he wanted to hear from young adults and experts about the challenges young people are facing in the church and society. The cardinal's office planned a dozen long, formal talks on subjects including "the search for identity," political commitment, planning for the future, technology and transcendence. But Hargot, who leads sex education programs at Catholic schools in Paris, told the gathering, "it's surprising we are looking at politics, economics, etc., but not at sexuality and affectivity, which are very important topics for young people. Young people want to talk about sexuality and love, They love learning about the theology of the body, a term referring to St. John Paul II's approach to sex and sexuality. I don't know why no one here is speaking about love. It's amazing."

Ashleigh Green, an Australian delegate to the seminar, said that going around Australia in preparation for the synod she found that "a lot of young people feel like they cannot talk about issues that matter to them" in most church settings. It's important to open up and talk about sex, sexuality and sexual orientation. And it's central to vocation."<sup>24</sup>

All these examples, listening sessions, and case studies have to be read and reflected on the light of the findings of more systematic professional research and evaluations carried out in the USA. An outstanding example is the survey of more than 4,000 Catholic campus ministers and students at U.S. colleges in 2017, commissioned by the United States Bishops' Secretariat of Catholic Education. Of the 1,911 active campus ministers nationally identified, representing 816 campuses, 1,047 responded, a response rate of 57 percent. The student survey reached 3,336 students. Survey results were released in October, 2017.

The survey showed that both the ministers and the students generally like what's happening in their campus ministry setting. Campus ministers reported that among personal activities, *Bible* study and reconciliation stand apart from other activities as contributing to students' growth in faith. Mass, retreats, small groups [SCCs]<sup>25</sup> and one-on-one mentoring are

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<sup>24</sup> Summary of Cindy Wooden, "Don't Be Embarrassed to Talk About Sex, Youth Tell Vatican Officials," *Catholic News Service* (CNS), 13 September 2017. Reprinted on NCR Website and CANAA Website, retrieved on 14 September, 2107, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/dont-be-embarrassed-talk-about-sex-youths-tell-vatican-officials>

<sup>25</sup> A valuable resource is *Small Groups Field Guide: A Smarter Way to Build Your Small Groups Program*. Produced by Michael St. Pierre and the Catholic Campus Ministry Association (CCMA) in the USA. 2017. Available as a printed book and an Ebook. [iBooks Version for iPhone & iPad](#). [PDF Version](#):

more significant than social events, catechesis and sacramental preparation, and men's and women's groups.

A majority of students do service or charitable work on at least a quarterly basis. Close to 40 percent are involved on a monthly basis in leadership development. Nearly half are involved weekly with social events or small groups [SCCs].

Students reported personal struggles over two broad categories. In the area of self-orientation, they included self-worth, mental health, lack of purpose, gender identity, divorce and blended families, and how to pray. In the area of social and moral issues, they reported living faithfully in "a hookup culture" and weighed in on such issues as pornography, abortion, racial and LGBT discrimination, sexual assault and the role of women in the church.

Pornography and mental health were the two areas where students said they were more likely to struggle a great deal. While a lower percentage of students mentioned pornography, the overall percentage of those who said they struggled a great deal with it was 27 percent, highest of any issue. Male students struggle more with pornography, while women struggle more in the broad categories of faith beliefs and self-orientation.<sup>26</sup>

## **5. The Way Forward**

A big question is: After college, what? Two years ago, I reported in *America Magazine*:

A large number of Catholic men and women graduating from institutions of higher learning are not finding a good fit -- a true spiritual and service-oriented home -- in their local parishes. Parish-based Small Faith Communities for young adults are a rarity in the U.S. Some graduates manage to find sustenance in alumni-based YSCCs. Some participate in Theology on Tap, a program of lectures and discussion on current topics of religion and theology sponsored by local Catholic dioceses and notable for its venue normally a bar or restaurant. Others connect with a variety of programs answering the Catholic Church's call for a new evangelization such as the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS), Evangelical Catholic and St. Paul's Outreach. The ESTEEM (Engaging Students to Enliven the Ecclesial Mission) program, for its part,

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<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/578cce236a49638ee359e17b/t/59e7bf7bd74cffd56e0dea38/1508360141336/Small+Groups+Field+Guide+PDF.pdf>

[Small Groups Discussion Guide](#)

<sup>26</sup> Summarized from Mark Pattison, "Porn, Mental Health are Top Challenges Faced by Collegians," Catholic News Service, 10 November, 2017, Catholic Philly Website, retrieved on 12 November, 2017, <http://catholicphilly.com/2017/11/news/national-news/porn-mental-health-are-top-challenges-faced-by-collegians>

prepares young men and women for leadership roles in parishes after college. Still other graduates gravitate to Small Bible Study Groups in Protestant churches.<sup>27</sup>

Our ongoing research reveals that a certain number of college graduates and young adults desire, even hunger for, some kind of faith sharing experience connected to their daily life, often built around *Bible* Sharing. So, one pastoral solution is to promote small faith sharing communities for college graduates that are either parish based or organized through some other network.

It is essential that youth adults can freely express their ideas. One challenge is that an innovative program like Theology on Tap does not become one way: that is, an adult speaker (like a bishop) “talks” to 30 or 50 or 75 youth adults in a bar or hall. Process is important. The young adults should be able to speak. The older people should listen. If during the session the young adults break out into small faith sharing communities, there can be even more interaction and dialog.

Justice Café is a similar interactive ministry for young adults.

Pope Francis has invited Christian and non-Christian young people from around the world to a pre-synod meeting in preparation for the Synod of Bishops on Young People in October, 2018. He said that the 19-24 March, 2018 meeting in Rome will be an opportunity for the church to listen to the hopes and concerns of young men and women. “Through this journey, the church wants to listen to the voices, the sensibilities, the faith as well as the doubts and criticisms of young people. We must listen to young people.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Joseph Healey, “When It Comes to Nurturing Faith, Smaller Is Often Better” and “When Smaller is Better: Small Faith Communities and the Future of the U.S. Church,” *America Magazine*, 24 May 2016, *America Media Website*, retrieved on 25 May, 2016, <http://americamagazine.org/issue/when-smaller-better>.

<sup>28</sup>Francis in Junno Arocho Esteves, “Pope Announces Pre-Synod Meeting To Listen To Youths’ Hopes, Doubts,” *Crux*, 4 October, 2017, *Crux Website*, retrieved on 30 November, 2017, <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2017/10/04/pope-announces-pre-synod-meeting-listen-youths-hopes-doubts>

**NOTE:** This is a chapter in Kevin Ahern and Christopher Derige Malano, (eds.), *God's Quad: Small Faith Communities on Campus and Beyond* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018.