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Title: Attracting and engaging the young people of today in the Australian Catholic Church

Abstract

This presentation will explore how the Australian Catholic Church can cultivate the participation of young people in the Church within these post-modern times. Young people today have been brought up in a culture of competing truths and a "you-do-you" mentality, where traditions and institutions hold less power or influence. The hierarchical and perceived inflexibility of the Church can pose a barrier to youth engagement, and necessitates a robust and informed response.

The presentation will consider how the Catholic Church in Australia can reimagine youth ministry beyond a "top-down" approach and instead embody an authentically synodal posture. Thus, this presentation will delve into the theme of leadership in context by unpacking what it means for the Church to be a leader encouraging and supporting youth participation in today's context.This discussion is theologically significant for the Church's future vitality.

Pope Francis' legacy of fostering a culture of encounter has encouraged leaders and communities to immerse themselves in the life of the world, which positions the Church to be attentive and responsive to the realities of young people's lives. The reality is that young people are shaped by the social media age and are yearning for genuine connection and community. This raises key questions: How can the Church adapt to attract young people into community life? How can it engage their interests so that they become active members? And how can listening and dialogue be prioritised while still proclaiming the Gospel?

The purpose of this presentation is to explore these questions and to identify what is currently effective in youth ministry in Australia, while also proposing ideas for new approaches to meet the challenges of the post-modern period. It will argue that the response must include at least three essential elements: creating community, fostering social justice initiatives, and encouraging peer-to-peer learning. First and foremost, the Church must be a place of belonging, where young people will find fraternity and accompaniment. From there, it should facilitate service and engagement in initiatives that have real-world impact, and provide opportunities for young people to connect with and learn from peers who share their values at national and international levels.

Throughout all of this, a synodal approach remains integral, requiring leaders to engage in bridge-building and to embrace differences. In a world of competing ideologies and beliefs, it is imperative that the Church continues to reflect on and adapt how it engages young people. Pope Francis' emphasis on encounter and dialogue has positioned the Church well, but further intentional discernment is needed to ensure it can truly support and engage youth in today's context. For the Church to flourish into the future, it is indispensable that youth ministry is responsive to the context of the day.