

A Pastoral Letter from the Catholic Bishops of Canada to Young People

Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

Dear young people,

God loves you! No matter what is happening in your life, you are at all times loved by a God who is with you always and wants you to flourish and be happy.

Christ saves you! Out of love for all humanity, Christ offered his life for everyone, including young people!

The Holy Spirit lives in you! The spirit of the risen Christ is alive in you and seeks to guide you in all that you do.

God's love and Christ's example empower you to challenge and change the world! What a difference you make to those who love you, and how valuable you are to our community of faith. You are the young Church of today and the Church of tomorrow. You are important to us, your Bishops, to your families, and to the world.

With this in mind, in the fall of 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we hosted several Zoom conversations for young people aged 12 to 15, 16 to 19, and 20 to 25. These conversations were held in both French and English, and in the Atlantic, Central, and Western regions of Canada. We invited young people to tell us openly how they view the world, about their hopes and dreams, and the stresses they experience today. Two hundred young people responded to our invitation, and our conversations were honest and insightful.

Our time together involved listening, reflecting, and discerning. These activities are part of what we call a "synodal" experience. The word "synodal" refers to a "path along which the People of God walk together."¹ The young people who participated in these conversations identified several issues that are important to them. Now we would like to share with all young people our reflections about what we heard. As Bishops of Canada, we wish to walk with young people, not only to understand better the world through their experience of it, but also to encourage and support them as they grow in their own faith.

As a starting point, we would like to recall how Jesus, as a young person, encountered teachers in the temple. What can we learn from this interaction?

JESUS ENCOUNTERS THE TEACHERS IN THE TEMPLE

After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. (Luke 2:46-47)

Luke's Gospel (2:41-52) contains a story about the time Mary and Joseph were unable to find Jesus after the Passover festival in Jerusalem. You can probably imagine how worried Mary and Joseph must have been when they were unable to find their son among so many people. When they found him at last in the temple, the young Jesus was sitting among the teachers and having a conversation with them. The teachers valued Jesus' voice as prophetic, just as we recognize the importance of young voices today. The story of Jesus in the temple shows us the importance of listening, asking good questions, and simply being there for one another.

Jesus' encounter with the teachers in the temple is a good way of thinking about the virtual conversations that were held in the fall of 2020.

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Christus vivit* — which is Latin for "Christ is alive!" — Pope Francis observes that "*Jesus does not teach you, young people, from afar or from without, but from within your very youth, a youth he shares with you. ... he was truly one of you.*"²

WALKING AND TALKING TOGETHER

The young people we spoke with shared with us that they value opportunities for dialogue. We grew in our understanding of how you want to engage in meaningful discussions about faith, what is happening around the world, and your hopes

and dreams. You wish to hear and be heard, to seek advice and guidance, and to have your own experience and wisdom validated.

Dialogue offers a chance to understand one another better, to share one another's gifts, and it creates a space where the Gospel message can ignite a spark deep within our hearts and transform each of us. Be courageous and compassionate with your families, friends, and faith communities. Be respectful and honest with others about your faith and what the Church means to you. Wherever you are, whatever you are doing, carry with you a message of good news!

Questions for reflection

Who were the people in your life who have helped you grow in faith?

Where do you feel most comfortable talking about and sharing your faith with others?

TECHNOLOGY AND FAITH

COVID-19 has highlighted the benefit of technology to share Christ's message. The young people who participated in the virtual conversations indicated they appreciated live-streamed masses, online youth group meetings and events that included prayer and music, especially during times of isolation. These experiences brought sustained faith and renewed hope.

Young people see the use of digital platforms as a viable means to encounter Christ in others. They hope that the Church will continue creative use of digital spaces post-COVID-19. While the benefits of technology are numerous, young people told us that their use of social media can become all-consuming, meaningless, and even hurtful, which leads to feelings of isolation, loneliness and diminished self-worth. Even though technology is designed to bring people together, it can leave us feeling more socially isolated than ever. While technological knowledge and skills are avenues to connect with others in meaningful ways, Pope Francis reminds us that virtual spaces cannot replace human relationships.³ The Pope has recently said:

[Jesus] calls us to embrace a reality that is so much more than virtual. This does not involve rejecting technology, but rather using it as a means and not as an end. "Arise!" is ... an invitation to "dream", to "take a risk", to be "committed to changing the world", to rekindle your hopes and aspirations, and to contemplate the heavens, the stars and the world around you. "Arise and become what you are!"⁴

When you are looking to develop relationships with others, dear young people, we encourage you to find a balance between virtual interactions and in-person gatherings where stronger connections can be formed. Arise, young people, and become who you are!

Questions for reflection

How do you balance time spent online with time spent in-person with family and friends?

How might the Church make better use of technology to connect with young people?

What does "becoming what/who you are" mean to you?

THE PRESENCE OF JESUS IN YOUR LIFE

The young people we heard from shared that they often experience stress, anxiety, and depression. Pressure from peers, tensions in the family, and concerns at school and work significantly impact mental health. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in unforeseen challenges and has left them with uncertainties about the present and future.

You wonder if you are well prepared to live in a post-pandemic world, including being admitted to post-secondary institutions and experiencing success in your studies, finding meaningful opportunities for work, and the ability to manage the rising cost of living.

The climate crisis is another source of stress for you. Perhaps more than any other generation, you understand the need for change and you show us by your actions what we can all do together to ensure God's gift of creation is cherished and preserved.

We see how stress and worry impact your lives, and we do not want you to feel alone. While we understand that it can be difficult to take the first step, we encourage you to reach out and seek support from your family. You can also talk to a priest or a youth minister, a teacher, a guidance counsellor, or a doctor. Together, we want to help you find balance in your lives through the care of your mind, body, heart, and soul. We want to help you flourish.

We understand that this can be challenging, given the realities you face. That is why we encourage you to allow others to walk with you as you follow your hopes and dreams.

Christ is with us always. When we pray, he gives us courage, peace, and comfort. Pope Francis reminds us that "we should not be hesitant, afraid to take chances or make mistakes."⁵ Do not be afraid to take risks! The greatest response you can offer to God for the gift of life is to take that life and live it fully.

Questions for reflection

Who is a caring and compassionate person in your life that you can ask to guide and help you in times when you are anxious?

How does prayer help you during times of sadness and stress?

In what ways or moments have you noticed Jesus' presence in your life?

GROWING IN FAITH: A LIFE-LONG LEARNING EXPERIENCE

The young people we heard from also expressed a strong desire to learn and grow in their faith. In one of our virtual conversations, a participant said, "It seems that after Confirmation, the Church forgets about us until marriage preparation." Others said they would like to see more opportunities to grow in faith, including retreats for discerning their vocation and community outreach designed to assist those most in need.

We understand that when you have questions about your faith, you want to be taken seriously and expect meaningful responses from Church leaders. We were humbled by your desire to listen to the stories of how we, as Bishops, came to know, love, and serve God in our lives. This shows us that you value witnesses as a source of inspiration for your faith journey.

We hear your call for ongoing formation and we want to assure you that we will include this in our pastoral planning. At the same time, we recognize your skill at finding creative ways to learn about your faith and share it with others. Young people have a knack for thinking outside the box: this enables you to take the experiences and events of your daily lives and use them as opportunities for evangelization and encounters with Jesus.⁶

The Church relies on your originality and creativity, your enthusiasm and youthfulness, to build up the Kingdom of God on earth. Your witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ can have a big impact on those around you. In the next section of this letter,

we will share with you a few examples of Christian witnesses whom we hope you can relate to: The Virgin Mary, St. Kateri Tekakwitha, and Blessed Carlo Acutis.

Questions for reflection

How can your parish community help you deepen your faith? Who is the best person to share your suggestions with at the parish?

What gifts can you offer young people within your faith community to help them develop their relationship with Jesus?

AN “INFLUENCER” AMONG US: MARY AND HOW HER “YES” CHANGED THE WORLD FOREVER

We sometimes forget that Mary, the Mother of Jesus, was herself a teenager when the angel Gabriel visited her in Nazareth. Mary openly embraced God’s dream for her. Filled with God’s spirit and attentive to God’s voice, she said “Yes” to giving her life to bring us the greatest gift of all: Jesus and his Kingdom.

Drawing on the words of Pope Francis, let us recall how Mary is a model in living out our faith and fulfilling God’s call and plan in our lives:

“We are always struck by the strength of the young Mary’s ‘yes’, the strength in those words, ‘be it done’, that she spoke to the angel. This was no merely passive or resigned acceptance, or a faint ‘yes’, as if to say, ‘Well, let’s give it a try and see what happens’. Mary did not know the words, ‘Let’s see what happens’. She was determined; she knew what was at stake and she said ‘yes’ without thinking twice. Hers 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. So I ask each one of you: do you see yourselves as the bearers of a promise? What promise is present in my heart that I can take up? Mary’s mission would undoubtedly be difficult, but the challenges that lay ahead were no reason to say ‘no’. ... She took the risk, and for this reason she is strong, she is an ‘influencer’, the ‘influencer’ of God. Her ‘yes and her desire to serve were stronger than any doubts or difficulties’.”⁷

Today, Mary watches over us as a mother and gently encourages us all to say “Yes” to God’s unique calling for each of us.

Questions for reflection

How does Mary’s “yes” help you better understand God’s plan for your life?

ST. KATERI TEKAKWITHA

Known as the “Lily of the Mohawks”, Kateri Tekakwitha was born in 1656 to a Catholic Algonquin mother and a Mohawk Chief. She was orphaned at a young age and also contracted smallpox, which left her almost blind and badly scarred her face. Two years after her Baptism, she fled to St. Francis Xavier Mission, a Christian Mohawk village in Kahnawake, Quebec. In Kahnawake, Kateri was known for her faith and holiness. She taught prayers to children, cared for the elderly and the sick, and would often attend mass at sunrise and sunset. She died of tuberculosis on 17 April 1680, shortly before her 24th birthday. Witnesses report that within minutes of her death, the smallpox scars vanished from her face, which then radiated with beauty. It is believed that since Kateri’s death, many miracles have been performed through her intercession, with the sick being cured and many prayers being answered.

Kateri was canonized by Pope Benedict XVI on 21 October 2012 in Rome. Today, there are a number of shrines dedicated to Saint Kateri in both the United States and Canada, including the Kateri Centre at her burial site at the St. Francis Xavier Mission in Kahnawake, which today is in the Diocese of Saint-Jean-Longueuil.

Faced with suffering and hardship, Saint Kateri is an extraordinary example of a young woman who gave witness to her faith in Jesus by modelling courage, perseverance and devotion to prayer and service.

CARLO ACUTIS – A YOUNG ROLE MODEL FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Many saints of our Church did not live to see adulthood. They are good examples of youthful holiness. Carlo Acutis practiced the Christian virtues to a heroic degree. His holiness was recognized according to the process of the Church, and he was named a “blessed”, meaning that he is venerated liturgically in his own country. He will eventually be proclaimed a saint and venerated throughout the Church. Carlo is the first millennial to be named “Blessed.”⁸

Carlo was an Italian young man of great faith who died of leukemia in 2006 at the age of 15. In many ways, he was a typical young person, like you. Carlo loved watching movies, reading, editing comics, and playing video games with friends. He was very compassionate toward those friends whose families were going through difficult times, he defended disabled peers from bullies at school and volunteered to help the homeless and destitute.

Like many young people today, Carlo was tech-savvy. He used the internet to make God's love known to others. He spent many hours working on his website, where he documented Eucharistic miracles around the world.⁹ Carlo used his gift with technology to evangelize and proclaim the Gospel through his website. Carlo is an example of what holiness looks like in the 21st century. He was an ordinary teenager with extraordinary faith, like many of you.

Questions for reflection

Following in the footsteps of Saint Kateri Tekakwitha, how do you find the strength to overcome the difficulties and challenges of life?

How does Blessed Carlo Acutis' legacy inspire you to be an extraordinary, ordinary young person of faith?

BE AN ORIGINAL

In closing, we would like to remind you of your value to the Church of today and the Church of tomorrow.

You are important to us! We are committed to finding opportunities to spend time, listening, learning, and growing in mutual understanding. The Church needs your vitality and enthusiasm now. Your Christian witness will inspire others and will at times "heal the wounds of the Church and of the world."¹⁰

You are important to your family and friends! These relationships guide you to love God, to be compassionate and empathetic, to resolve conflict, forgive one another, value work, contribute to the common good, and love your neighbour. The lessons you learn in your family and with your friends will help you throughout your life.

You are important to the world! Your faith, hope, and love are needed to bring about a more just and compassionate Church and world. Allow the Holy Spirit to guide you and help you to understand how to use your unique gifts and talents for good. Pope Francis reminds us of the words of Blessed Carlo Acutis: "everyone is born as an original, but many people end up dying as photocopies."¹¹ Be an original! Arise and become who you are meant to be!

We walk together, sustained by the strength, courage, and hope of Jesus Christ.

Sincerely,

The Most Rev. Raymond Poisson,
Bishop of Saint-Jérôme-Mont-Laurier
President of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

12 October 2022

ENDNOTES

¹International Theological Commission, [*Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*](#), 2 March 2018, para 3.

²Pope Francis, "Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation [*Christus vivit*](#) [25 March 2019] (Ottawa: CCCB, 2019), 31.

³See Pope Francis, [*Christus vivit*](#), 88.

⁴Pope Francis. [*Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 35th World Youth Day 2020*](#) (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020).

⁵ Pope Francis, [Christus vivit](#), 142.

⁶ See Pope Francis, [Christus vivit](#), 210.

⁷ Pope Francis, [Christus vivit](#), 44.

⁸ Vatican News, "[Carlo Acutis: Millennial generation has a Blessed.](#)" 10 October 2020.

⁹ <http://www.miracolieucaristici.org>

¹⁰ Pope Francis, [Christus vivit](#), 50.

¹¹ Pope Francis, [Christus vivit](#), 106.

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