

Christ is Alive

AN APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION BY POPE FRANCIS

*Youth, University Students and Young Adults as
Courageous Evangelizers and Global Missionaries*



world. He asks that the Church “may never fail to weep before the tragedies of our young” (No. 75) and he laments the evils of kidnapping, extortion, organized crime, human trafficking, slavery and sexual exploitation, wartime rape, the poverty, violence, abuse and addiction that tragically destroy the lives of young people (No. 72-75).

The Holy Father speaks of the global missionary opportunities as well as the pitfalls of a global digital environment (No. 86-90). He addresses with compassion and insight the plight of young global refugees and immigrants so often fleeing from war, violence, political or religious persecution, gangs and extreme poverty and he calls on the Church “to play a prophetic role in society.”

He also emphasizes the moving solidarity and mutual enrichment between the young and the elderly of the world. (No. 187-191) The Holy Father begins *Christ is Alive* with these words:

“Christ is alive! He is our hope, and in a wonderful way he brings youth to our world, and everything he touches becomes young, new, full of life... Christ is alive and he wants you to be alive! He is in you, he is with you and he never abandons you. However far you may wander, he is always there, the Risen One. He calls you and he waits for you to return to him and start over again...I encourage you to grow in holiness and in commitment to your personal vocation” (No. 1-3).

The Holy Father is now 82-years-old and yet he shows in his voice and his tone that a spirit of holiness and mission is a youthful spirit at any age. When Christ is alive and real in our lives, we can experience a grace-streaming fountain of youth in every season of life. The Holy Father in his age, in his wisdom and in his youthful spirit addresses young people in a moving and heart-felt way that can inspire and motivate them.

Pope Francis has now been our Holy Father for over six and one half years (March 2013 to the fall of 2019). It is exciting now to trace how the themes of *The Joy of the Gospel* (2013), *Laudato Si'* (2015), *The Joy of Love* (2016), *Rejoice and Be Glad* (2018) and *Christ is Alive* (2019) are creatively connecting and reinforcing Pope Francis' global missiology and spirit of evangelization grounded in the

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Pope Francis' March 25, 2019, Apostolic Exhortation *Christ is Alive* is addressed to young people and to the entire People of God. It represents a synthesis of the presentations, conversations, and consultations of the Synod on Youth held in Rome in October 2018 and the centuries long experience of the Church.

The Holy Father touches many themes and chords. He does a beautiful and inspirational synthesis of the witness of youth in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and in every century of Church history. He shows how the experiences of the young Jesus and Mary guide, center and inspire the youth of today.

He writes: “The life that Jesus gives us is a love story, a *life history* that wants to blend with ours and sink root in the soil of our own lives” (No. 252). A good deal of *Christ is Alive* is a conversation with the young about their dreams, their hopes, their life experiences and how Jesus Christ and the mission of mercy of the Catholic Church can help shape them and their destinies, destinies grounded in a burning desire for Heaven and eternal life.

The Holy Father also explores the crisis experiences of young people in the context of the crises of the

corporal and spiritual works of mercy.

One of the critical themes that is emerging from the teaching texts of Pope Francis is a profound synthesis and practical application of the Sacred Scriptures to daily life. He wakes us up from biblical lethargy and shines Christ's light of fresh insight and inspiration on biblical texts in powerful ways.

Pope Francis has a passion for biblical texts and in the words of the Spencer Trappist Fr. Simeon wants biblical texts "to echo in our souls and establish their own rhythm in our thinking, feeling, and even breathing."

Pope Francis writes: "Let us draw upon some of the richness of the sacred Scriptures, since they often speak of young people and of how the Lord draws near to encounter them" (No. 5).



He then does a soul-stirring and soul-motivating synthesis of heroic and holy young people in the Old Testament and in the New Testament with, of course, a special emphasis on the young Jesus and the young Mary.

Pope Francis' biblical charism is to help us see more deeply things we so often already know about the Sacred Scriptures.

He starts with the Old Testament. The young Joseph remains steadfast and faithful to the Lord amidst the twists and turns of terrible injustice and family betrayal (No. 7).

Through the story of the young Samuel, the Holy Father emphasizes how intimate God is with young people and how God personally and passionately calls young people at the crossroads of life.

He writes: "Samuel was still a young boy, yet the Lord spoke to him. Thanks to the advice of an adult (Eli), he opened his heart to hear God's call: 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.' (1 Samuel 3:9-10)" (No. 8).

"Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" is a powerful daily prayer for young people. It is good to pray as we begin a period of silent mental prayer. It is good to pray as we begin prayer over the Scriptures (*lectio divina*). It is good to pray as we prepare for Mass.

For a young person making decisions at the crossroads of life, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" is a powerful

"Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" is a powerful daily prayer for young people" (No. 8).

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The Holy Father states: "Jesus himself eternally young, wants to give us hearts that are ever young (No. 13)... It is very important for you to contemplate the young Jesus as presented in the Gospels, for he was truly one of you, and shares many of the features of your young hearts" (No. 31).

Pope Francis lovingly confronts our biblical lethargy and boredom and opens a door for young people to connect their young life experiences with the young life experiences of Jesus in the Gospels.

He emphasizes that the young Jesus was deeply relational and deeply committed to his family: "His relationships were those of a young person who shared fully in the life of his family and his people. He learned his father's trade and then replaced him as a carpenter. At one point in the gospel he is called 'the carpenter's son' (Mt 13:55) and another time simply 'the carpenter' (Mk 6:3)" (No. 28).

His learning of the carpentry craft

"Becoming a saint means becoming more fully yourself, becoming what the Lord wished to dream and create, and not a photocopy" (No. 162).



models for young people the sanctification of daily work whether that work is a mathematics problem set, a literary essay on a novel or a summer job at Dunkin' Donuts, King Kullen or 7-11.

The Holy Father emphasizes that deep immersion in the mysteries/events of Christ's life keeps us enthusiastic and alive in Christ.

He stresses that the Holy Spirit is constantly offering young people "more of his friendship, more fervor in prayer, more hunger for his word, more longing to receive Christ in the Eucharist, more desire to live by his gospel, more inner strength, more peace and spiritual joy" (No. 101).

He recognizes that the wide range of hurts that every young person experiences and that can lead to a temptation to withdraw from others (a temptation already present in the digital media world), and to turn in on themselves (No. 165).

He asks them to overcome this temptation through intimacy with Christ and a new discovery of the Divine Mercy and the power of forgiveness. The hurts of life can be transformed by the Cross of Christ into places of discovery of a new sensitivity, compassion and capacity to serve. The Sacrament of Penance liberates young people and opens them to God's vistas emerging in their lives.

The best intuition of young people to discern and discover their future is found in their baptismal call to holiness and mission. The Holy Father echoes the advice of St. Francis de Sales who once said, "Be who you are and be that well."

The Holy Father writes:

"But I would also remind you that you won't become holy and find fulfillment by copying others...You have to discover who you are and develop your own way of being holy, whatever others may say or think. Becoming a saint means becoming more fully yourself, becoming what the Lord wished to dream and create, and not a photocopy. Your life ought to be a prophetic stimulus to others and leave a mark on this world, the unique mark that only you can leave" (No. 162).



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Above (from left): Sisters de Lourdes Okoniewski and Florence Kruczek, OSF. Photo: Jim Judkis ©2019 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, DC. All rights reserved.

Pope Francis is clear that these “unique marks” are missionary marks of holiness: “Where does Jesus send us? There are no borders, no limits: he sends us everywhere. The Gospel is for everyone, not just for some. It is not only for those who seem closer to us, more receptive, more welcoming. It is for everyone.

Do not be afraid to go and bring Christ into every area of life, to the fringes of society, even to those who seem farthest away and indifferent. The Lord seeks all; he wants everyone to feel the warmth of his mercy and his love. He invites us to be fearless missionaries wherever we are and in whatever company we find ourselves: in our neighborhoods, in school or sports or social life, in volunteer service or in the workplace. Wherever we are, we always have an opportunity to share the joy of the Gospel. That is how the Lord goes out to meet everyone.

He loves you, dear young people, for you are the means by which he can spread his light and hope. He is counting on your courage, your boldness and your enthusiasm” (No. 177).

In regard to a young person’s discernment of every dimension of their path in life, Pope Francis balances the adventure of youth and openness to new horizons and new experiences with the maturity necessary to make definite life commitments and destiny decisions. These decisions inevitably involve opening new doors but also closing the doors of options not chosen.

He writes:

“Some young people might hate this stage of life, because they want to continue being children or indefinitely prolong their adolescence and put off having to make decisions. ‘Fear of the definitive thus generates a kind of paralysis of decision-making. Yet youth cannot remain on hold. It is the age of choices and herein lies its fascination and its greatest responsibility. Young people make decisions in professional, social and political fields, and in other more radical ways that determine the shape of their lives.’ They also make decisions about love, choosing a spouse and starting a family (No. 140)...Dear young people, make the most of these years of your youth. Don’t observe life from a balcony. Don’t confuse happiness with an armchair or live your life behind a screen. Whatever you do, do not become the sorry sight of an abandoned vehicle! Don’t be parked cars but dream freely and make good decisions. Take risks, even it means making mistakes. Don’t go through life anaesthetized or approach the world like tourists. Make a ruckus! Cast out the fears that paralyze you, so that you don’t become young mummies. Live! Give yourselves over to the best of life! Open the door of the cage, go out and fly! Please, don’t take early retirement” (No. 143).

Intimacy with Jesus, openness to his inspired Word, radical fidelity to the Eucharist and the Sunday Mass, a deep and effective spirit of practical daily evangelization and a burning desire for eternal life is what gives the young person the depth, maturity and judgment to make life decisions.

Finally, Pope Francis concludes *Christ is Alive* with these powerful words:

“Dear young people, my joyful hope is to see you keep running the race before you, outstripping all those who are slow or fearful. Keep running, ‘attracted by the face of Christ, whom we love so much, whom we adore in the Holy Eucharist and acknowledge in the flesh of our suffering brothers and sisters. May the Holy Spirit urge you on as you run this race. The Church needs your momentum, your intuitions, your faith. We need them! And when you arrive where we have not yet reached, have the patience to wait for us” (No. 299). †

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