



Now that the energy of the youth and vocation synod is flowing into ministry strategy, what should vocation ministers understand? Here is the perspective of a college student who took part in a post-synod gathering.

Young adults in Catholic ministry are beginning to call for new approaches in ministry that can help meet the needs of members in their 20s and 30s. Pictured here are participants in a Parish Ministry and Catechetical Conference put on by the Diocese of Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Four vocation ministry ideas from the synod

The 2018 synod on “young people and vocation discernment” brought forth a number of messages, but four have particular resonance in the world of vocation ministry. First the synod encouraged a broad understanding of vocation. Second, it likewise opened up our definition of discernment. Third it put a particular emphasis on the accompaniment of young people. And fourth, it encouraged a “whole-person” approach to ministry. Each of these foundational concepts has implications for how vocation ministers proceed in their work.

1) Vocation: every Christian has one

Let’s begin with what the synod had to say about the foundation of this ministry: the concept of vocation. Following the synod Pope Francis issued the apostolic exhortation *Christus Vivit* (Christ Lives), which includes this: “The word ‘vocation’ can be understood in a broad sense as a calling from God, including the call to life, the call to friendship with him, the call to holiness, and so forth” (248).

The Holy Father’s words echo the words of young people who gathered to give input prior to the official synod. In their final document young

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people expressed a desire for “a simple and clear understanding of vocation to highlight the sense of call and mission, desire and aspiration,” because the term vocation has “sometimes been presented as an abstract concept, perceived as too far out of the reach of the minds of many.”

Indeed Pope Francis has helped us to re-frame our understanding of vocation and discernment to, as he stated in *Gaudete et Exultate*, “re-propose the call to holiness in a practical way for our own time with all its risks, challenges, and opportunities.” Pope Francis is not diminishing what some call state of life vocations or particular vocations but is indeed lifting up the universal call to holiness that is laid forth in *Lumen Gentium* and, in turn, lifting up particular vocations as well.

The second chapter of the post-synod document is dedicated to vocation and begins with the story of the calling of Samuel. In this story where Samuel repeatedly hears the call of God and mistakenly attributes it to Eli, we see that “for every man and every woman vocation, while it may have strong and privileged moments, involves a long journey,” a long journey that requires accompaniment, a practice we will examine later in this article. This journey on which young people are accompanied is not a straight path to the religious life, the priesthood, the single life, or marriage, but is primarily and integrally a journey of holiness and relationship with Jesus Christ. The pre-synod document lays this out clearly:

The term “vocation” has become synonymous with the priesthood and religious life in the culture of the Church. While these are sacred calls that should be celebrated, it is important for young people to know that their vocation is by virtue of their life, and that each person has a responsibility to discern what it is that God calls them to be and to do. There is a fullness to each vocation which must be highlighted in order to open the hearts of young people to their possibilities.

As Pope Francis has begun to re-frame our understanding of vocation, he has done so after listening to the voices of young people who are calling for a greater understanding of vocation. So too must those who work in vocation ministry listen as well. The call to religious life, priesthood, etc. is not to be ignored or minimized in any way but must be seen as complementary and totally dependent upon a life aimed at holiness which fuels the person to then be sent as an apostle into the world in whichever way God calls. As Pope Francis reminds us in

Christus Vivit, our vocation journey is a response to and participation in a love story that God himself is offering. As anyone who has been in love will remind us, a love story takes time to unfold and is multi-dimensional.

2) Discernment: a lifelong practice

I was talking to a church friend once and asked, “Did you know Katie is discerning?” She looked at me and said, “Brian, everyone is discerning, what do you mean?” This question in and of itself shows where we are as a church with the word “discernment.” In many ministry circles the word discernment has become reductive to mean only our discernment of a vocation to the priesthood or religious life. Pope Francis reminds us that discernment of vocation, both our universal vocation to holiness and our individual particular vocations, must always be seen as service to the church and to the world, and as such, “in discerning [our] vocation, it is important to determine if [we] see in [ourselves] the abilities needed to perform that specific service to society” (*Christus Vivit*).

In fostering vocation, we grow and develop our entire person to discover what God is calling us to. In such, the duty of a vocation director is not just to guide on the path to an individual order or to push someone to accept a singular charism, but to first walk with individuals as they discern where God is calling them in every facet of their life. These facets, while including particular vocation, also include day-to-day relationship, familial, and professional decisions that are a part of the love story that we take part in.

Pope Francis reminds us in *Christus Vivit* that discernment of one’s vocation requires silence, “which enables us better to perceive God’s language.... Yet this silence does not make us close in on ourselves.” Out of this silence, this listening for God’s voice that most often becomes known to us in a soft whisper (1 Kings 19:12), should come humility. In this silence, we allow ourselves to focus our attention on our hearts, “the central point of interiority of the person, where listening to the Word that God is constantly addressing to us becomes a criterion for evaluating our life and our choices” (Final Document of the Synod on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment).

The Holy Father reminds us that, “we should not start with wondering where we could make more money, or achieve greater recognition and social status.... If we are not to go astray, we need a different starting point.” This humility is not only useful to determine if a voca-

tion to a religious order or community that lives out poverty is where God is calling, but also humility helps us live day to day life, married or single, or, if God wills, in the religious or consecrated life. To properly discern God's will we must resist being reductive in our understanding of discernment and see the need to accompany those who are discerning.

3) Accompaniment: walking with young people

Accompaniment is deeply scriptural; God accompanied the Israelites in the Old Testament; Jesus accompanied his disciples through their time together, with the most noted example being Jesus on the Road to Emmaus. It is no surprise that Pope Francis has put such a heavy emphasis on the practice of accompaniment throughout his pontificate. Accompaniment, especially during vocational discernment, must begin by seeing the person who is being accompanied and his or her experience and situation as sacred ground in front of which we remove our sandals (*Evangelii Gaudium*). When we remove our sandals and see each person we accompany as sacred ground, as individuals whom God has called to a specific vocation, as opposed to an empty cup to be filled with our wisdom. More than telling the person who we are accompanying what we think he or she should do, we must acknowledge that, as the Final Document of the Synod reminds us, “[the young] are constantly called to make decisions that give direction to their lives; they want to be heard, acknowledged and accompanied.” Accompaniment requires a sense of reciprocity that is willing to teach when necessary, but also to learn from the one whom we accompany as that person's experiences might allow us to see things in a new light.

The model of accompaniment Jesus gave us on the Road to Emmaus, a model referred to repeatedly in *Christus Vivit* and the Synod documents, is one that necessarily begins with listening and that journeys with the person. When Jesus appeared to his disciples on the road, he surely knew why they were upset, but he still asked them the question so they could make their feelings and experiences known. Even as he asked the question, he was met with hostility as one of the disciples responded, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know of the things that have taken place there in these days?” Even still, Jesus continued to ask and prompt, to journey with the disciples through their suffering and grief. Only after they had talked and shared what they had to say with Christ did he teach.

While teaching is an important part of a relationship of accompaniment, it is not the starting point, and it is certainly not the climax of the relationship. When Jesus was ready to depart, the disciples urged him to remain with them. It was then in the breaking of the bread that they recognized him. Had Jesus not let them talk, had he not conveyed trust through his willingness to listen and even accept their hostility, what are the chances that they would've urged him to remain with them longer?

4) Minister to the whole person

Vocation ministry requires a renewed understanding of vocation that is not reductive, but indeed seeks the development of the entire person. We must understand that the vocation to holiness will manifest itself in different ways for different people, but that it must always be rooted in the Gospel and the truths of our faith. That truth is that Jesus Christ is calling us all to follow him, not only in our choice between particular vocations, but in how we live our lives through that discernment, and how we continue to discern his will for us even after we've found our particular vocation. Our particular vocation, without a properly understood vocation to holiness, is a shell that is empty on the inside. The missionary call to holiness that young people are called to requires ongoing encounter with the Risen Lord that permeates the daily life of young people. The Final Document of the Synod reminds us:

To speak of human life in vocational terms allows us to highlight some elements that are very important for the growth of young people: it means excluding the view that they are determined by destiny or are the product of chance, or else that they are a private good to be managed at will. If in the first case there is no vocation, because there is no recognition of a destination worthy of existence, in the second a human being thought of as “rootless” becomes “vocationless.” This is why it is important to establish the conditions to allow all Christian communities, building on the baptismal consciousness of their members, to develop a genuine vocational culture and a constant commitment to pray for vocations.

This vocational culture that the document speaks of is cultivated through authenticity, honesty, and a culture of accompaniment that encourages vocation to not be seen as a singular moment of realization in our spiritual lives, but as ongoing moments that help us to see God's plan more clearly.

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Vocation ministry at its best will encourage ongoing discernment without losing its attention to particular vocations. The attention that discernment gives to the vocation of holiness also helps to cultivate discernment of the particular vocation. Accompaniment is key to any form of discernment. Ideally vocation ministry can move past a model based primarily on events, whose success is evaluated by how many young people attended this or that. This is not to say that we must completely avoid events; they are a great opportunity for initial encounter and for building Christian community, a desire often articulated by young people.

But we must look deeper than events. When we accompany, we see past numbers and see individuals with stories, with desires, with a path that has been ordained by God for them. This accompaniment, importantly, does not only come from vocation directors or spiritual directors, but also from those who are discerning their particular vocation themselves. Building community is vitally important for the ongoing formation and perpetuation of the culture of discernment. This is especially true in a society and culture so focused on individualism and self-ability that it approaches the "contemporary Pelagianism" that Pope Francis writes about in *Gaudete*

et Exsultate. We cannot embark on this journey alone; Christ sent out the apostles in pairs; the most well-known of the saints had companions (St. Ignatius and St. Francis Xavier, St. Francis and St. Clare, St. Vincent Pallotti and St. Gaspar del Bufalo, etc.), and I would wager that those who read this, when they look back upon their vocational journeys, will find they were accompanied as well by great mentors and friends who walked with them on their journey and continue to accompany them today.

The synodal process did not redefine vocation and discernment but rather offered us a new framework through which to look. In this framework, we are encouraged to balance the missionary call to holiness with particular vocation, for the latter without the former is empty. The discernment of vocation must be cultivated through accompaniment which first sees the other person as sacred ground which requires us to take off our shoes and allows us to enter into their journey with great openness, sincerity, and honesty. If vocation directors are willing to see this reframing as a means to forming missionary disciples—married, single, priests, and religious—then the church herself will grow as her members go out with zeal, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to make of all disciples. ■