

From the Synod on Young People

Launching processes

Emile Abou-Chaar

Launch processes towards 'building a people', prioritize actions that generate new dynamism in the Church and in society, and transform spaces into 'links in a constantly expanding chain' (cf. EG 222-225). Such are a few pastoral directives continually proposed by Pope Francis from the beginning of his Petrine ministry. And preparation of the Synod on Young People was paradigmatic of this. Here, we report the experience of a young Lebanese, *Emile Abou-Chaar*, who participated on behalf of the Maronite Church in the pre-synodal meeting held in March 2018.

On Wednesday, February 14, 2018, I received a call from Mons. Toufic Bou-Hadir to ask my participation in the pre-synodal meeting in Rome, from March 19 to 24, 2018, as a youth representative for Maronites in Lebanon and around the world. In order to prepare for the meeting together, a group of young people from the Patriarchal Office of Youth Ministry was formed, and met the following week to discuss the current situation of young people and future projects.

There were 350 young people attending the Rome meeting: Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, and members of other Christian Churches, as well as youth from other religions and non-believers. We came from five continents, which reinforced the fact that this was really a synod of "young people", for *all* young people regardless of religious confession, region, or ethnicity. We were five from Lebanon: Karnig Panossian (Catholic Armenians), Roy Jreich (Greek Melchite Catholics), Tony Tahan (Catholic Syriac), Dalia Al-Mokdad (Muslim), and myself.

"This is the Church we've been waiting for!"

The pre-synodal meeting began on Monday, March 19th, with a dialogue between Pope Francis and the youth. The Pope told us our contribution was indispensable for preparing the synod, considering that the good God, in difficult times, brings history ahead through the youngest. He also said that this meeting should be a sign of something great, of the Church's willingness to listen to all young people, without excluding anyone. Therefore, he asked us to speak with courage, without fear, say what we feel, but also listen with humility. It was an extraordinary encounter. I really felt the presence of a "father" who gives of himself by listening to the youth, and wants the whole church to find needed tools for assisting young people in the challenges they face. This is the church that we've been waiting for!

During the days that followed, we divided ourselves into groups by language, in order to respond to fifteen questions grouped into three sub-themes: challenges and opportunities of young people in today's world; faith and vocation, discernment and accompaniment; and education, work and pastoral care in the Church. There were twenty groups physically present at the meeting, and six

others on Facebook. Each group reported their findings, presenting them to the translation and drafting committee.

I was part of the French language group that brought together young people from Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. I was very touched by the testimonies of our group members, especially by the creativity of the Africans in conceiving a new method for making the local church more attractive, and by the great faith of the Europeans that was reflected in the sense of belonging they felt towards their communities, despite the secularism in their countries.

This made me realize that we, young Maronites from Lebanon, also have specific challenges and opportunities in front of us. We want to play an active, counter-current role: Doing this, first and foremost, by finding points in common with brothers and sisters of different religions and political affiliations so as to unite forces and bring out all the positive that exists in our diversity. We will build the civilization of tomorrow, the civilization of love, on the foundation of this Synod.

As a part of the editorial and translation committee, we were also tasked with summarizing the 26 group reports into one document. A friendly atmosphere reigned during all the work. We brought our work before the plenary twice before presenting the third and final version to Pope Francis during Palm Sunday Mass. In this way, everyone participated in its final drafting and our authentic voices were heard, as the Pope had requested.

A call to be protagonists of change

To conclude, I think the Synod of Young People was a historical event not only for the church, but for the whole world. The pope's wish that it be prepared by us, young people, is a new approach in his relationship with us. It was really moving to feel the church so close to young people, and even to nonbelievers! It was a formidable experience for me to see the richness in meeting with youth from all over the world and a challenge to step out of my own diocesan and parish membership in order to speak on behalf of all Maronite youth.

Leaving Rome, I was sure this experience would remain forever etched in my spiritual life and that I would share it with the young people in my parish, Sant'Elia ad Ain Aar, and with all young people of the Maronite Diocese of Antelia, where I am a co-coordinator for the Committee of young people. I really felt the good Lord actively present in the Synod preparations: He desires something for us, he wants to be close to us through His church. It's time to let Him act. He called us, young people, from all over the world, from dioceses, parishes and movements, in order to unite us in helping the bishops to renew the face of the church, so that it may be young, fresh, welcoming, humble, honest and joyful.

In a few words: *It's a call from God to be protagonists of change in his church!*