

## Youth and life experience

# Let young people surprise us

### Claudio Maino

*Claudio Maino is priest from the diocese of Puglia, Italy, who works with youth and in seminary formation. He speaks here about his service and commitment to the new generations. One of his basic convictions? Avoid a mentality of 'community formation' for youth. Rather, focus on the community 'allowing itself to be formed' by its youth as well.*

It is no longer scandalous or inappropriate to ask whether one still believes in God in today's world. Nor should this be immediately dismissed as hopeless. Rather, one can see it as echoing Jesus' powerful words in Luke's Gospel: "[W]ill he find faith on earth?" (18, 8).

Jesus' words are not at all pessimistic or catastrophic, however, rather they are empowering, because being a believer in today's world is no longer a given (not that it has ever been). Our own effort and response are needed, together with commitment perhaps, so that others are also helped in their journey of faith.

I will speak briefly of how I try to live my own personal commitment to serve the new generations. In particular I should mention that what I share here is a fruit of conversations, accompaniment and meetings that were lived largely in a region of southern Italy.

### Challenges

#### *Listening and trust*

The number of young people in our community's church structures, or those choosing to engage in some service or participate through associations or Movements, has become less and less. They are the ones who have not yet given up, and the first challenge I see is in listening to these young people.

Undoubtedly, thanks to the Pope's strong encouragement, much progress has been made already in this regard. Yet, for us adults, I note that we can find it disconcerting to truly listen to young people. Often, we see children and young people only as *recipients* and *learners*. Perhaps, there is a need for a different perspective that breaks our unconscious claims to always being "the teachers".

Then, a second listening challenge is that young people's actions do not always correspond to their words (also many adults for that matter). Dynamism, and sometimes explosive enthusiasm, characterize many young people and giving them that space is something we must try to do because it is needed. Yet the problem is often a lack of stability and constancy

in their lives, and this is where the real challenge in listening comes from. On one occasion, while I was in the process of being transferred to another parish, a 19-year-old, Vincent, wrote me a letter to thank me above all for one thing: "that you continued to trust me despite all the garbage" (meaning despite all his inconsistencies).

### *Qualified, humble, helpful mentors*

Another increasingly urgent challenge is the availability of mentors and teachers. It is not true that the new generations demand only their autonomy, they seek -- and feel the lack of -- teacher figures who are qualified, humble and eager to spend time with them. It is rare in our environments to find such people with both training and theological knowledge, as well as having a focus on listening, building close relationships and accompanying others in important and delicate life choices. It is time to invest resources, people and time in order to find and train such educators. Our young people need this as much as they need bread to eat.

### *Witness and beauty*

Then, it is necessary to speak one of the most difficult challenges: the many young people who we have no contact with at all and who perhaps, in truth, have no desire to meet us. Freda, 21, once told me: "The Church is now just an unattractive, authoritarian figure that limits itself to constantly judging other people's actions." In reality, the young people that we might call 'far from God', no longer even feel this distance. "Far from what?", they would respond. Armando Matteo in his well-known 2010 research wrote of a peremptory phrase that is now markedly evident after the pandemic: "They simply learned to get by without God and without the Church"<sup>1</sup>.

It seems to me that the only way to face this challenge is through witness (especially that of their peers) and through beauty. Youth -- like every human being -- are sensitive to beauty, which leads us to look at that which goes beyond ourselves. It may seem an unnecessary waste of time, yet it is precisely putting a priority on beauty recalls beauty lies within itself the mystery of God. We should ask ourselves if our celebrations, our environments, our meetings, and our songs are beautiful? Is the witness of our evangelical life beautiful? No one remains indifferent to beauty: these are the burning bushes that can be opportunities to encounter God.

### **The Path Ahead**

But are there hopes and possibilities? The greatest joy gained from working with young people is to be able to emphatically respond in the positive to this question. Although the discouragement felt by many is understandable, I will try to point out below some indications that the era of the new generations in the Church is not at an endpoint.

### *Youth as the new protagonists*

Thanks to both the 2018 Synod and the current synodal journey, it is now possible for young people to be greater protagonists in ecclesial life. During a conference on these issues, Anna, 20, came to the microphone and bluntly said: "We do not want to just be listened to and that's it... We want to count more. In churches or dioceses, is there a real decision-making space for young people or do you consider us only when there is a need for 'workers? We want to be protagonists in building a new path together". I found a lot of hope in her words:

youth want to be protagonists and it is visible in different communities. There is no future for a model of the Church in which a young person is a kind of 'spare tire' for when others are missing or resources are scarce. Making them protagonists more is not a concession but a recognition of their potential in proclaiming the Gospel.

During an April 2022 meeting with teenagers, Pope Francis reminded everyone that young people – despite their not having experience – have a 'nose' to find the Lord, a nose for truth. The preparatory 2018 Synod document clearly recalled that young people must be asked to help the Church understand the most effective ways to proclaim the Good News today. The document also speaks of the Church herself needing to learn from young people.

### *Uncertainty and risk*

Another important understanding for me was the realization that when we let ourselves be 'displaced' by young people, something new is always born, something that sooner or later will bear fruit at the pastoral level. It is a bold choice to make. Young people are not only "objects" of our pastoral efforts, they are also "subjects" of their own faith journeys and growth.

Yet this is not a simple change of perspective. It means being ready to lose control, to let go and not indulge our 'anxieties' about how things must go ahead. For an ecclesial community to treat young people as subjects in complex but fruitful generational integration with priests, families and others, will mean tolerating uncertainty and taking risks without having ready-made 'solutions'. A community needs lightness, openness to new ideas and an ability to minimize structures. When this happens, youth express their best quality: freedom! This should not frighten us. Rather it is a precious resource.

In conclusion, being able to step aside means no longer thinking of a community as 'forming' its youth, but rather of a community 'being formed'<sup>3</sup> also by them, by these youthful protagonists with their dreams and desires, their 'noses', and even their inconsistencies.

<sup>1</sup> A. Matthew, A. *La prima generazione incredula. Il difficile rapporto tra i giovani e la fede* (The first generation incredulous. The difficult relationship between young people and faith) , Rubettino, Soveria Mannelli 2010, pg. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Synod of Bishops – XV Ordinary Assembly, *Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment. Instrumentum laboris*, Vatican City : [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/synod/documents/rc\\_synod\\_doc\\_20180508\\_instrumentum-xvassemblea-giovani\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20180508_instrumentum-xvassemblea-giovani_en.html)

<sup>3</sup> Cf. F. Vanotti, *Accompagnare gli adolescenti* (Accompanying Adolescents), in «Note di pastorale giovanile» 57 (2023/1), pg. 11.