

That document on youth from Pope Francis — worth reading?

 bulldogcatholic.org/2024/03/05/that-document-on-youth-from-pope-francis-worth-reading/



Q: I heard that the pope wrote a document on youth recently. What are the main takeaways? Is it worth reading?

A: Since one of the roles that our bishop has given me has been as the director of the Office of Youth Ministry, I had a vested interest in learning what the Holy Father had to say, as well.

At first, I have to admit that I was a little put off. I often get a little “salty” when it comes to anything that strikes me as pandering to a particular audience. And at first glance, that was all that I noticed. The tone initially reminded me of the tired way that some adults try to “butter up” young people. I’m paraphrasing, but notions like “youth is the best!” kept echoing through the first chapters. (Stay gold, Ponyboy.) “You are not the Church of the future ... you are the Church right now!” has been uttered so many times that I first heard it when I was a youth (that’s when it really mattered, right?). “Jesus was a young person too!” Really? No! (That note just reminded me of the section in People Magazine: “Celebrities are just like you ... they pump gas into their cars too!”)

Apparently, I hadn’t had my cup of coffee yet that morning.

But then I noticed something about the document. It soon became obvious that the pope was teaching. Even more, he was proclaiming the Gospel.

In the fourth chapter, Pope Francis offers a proclamation of God's love in the person of Jesus Christ. It is the kerygma offered to a new generation and renewed for all generations. In three simple steps, Pope Francis uttered powerful truths: God is love, Christ saves you, and the Spirit gives life. The Gospel declaration that "We are saved by Jesus because he loves us and cannot go against his nature. We can do any number of things against him, yet he loves us and he saves us. For only what is loved can be saved. Only what is embraced can be transformed. The Lord's love is greater than all our problems, frailties, and flaws. Yet it is precisely through our problems, frailties, and flaws that he wanted to write this love story."

I found myself "cut to the heart" by the power of his preaching. What I had initially seen only as catering to the younger demographic was nothing of the sort; he was reaching out to them. I noticed that what I had first seen as pandering was actually the Holy Father making an appeal.

He wasn't praising every possible youthful, or self-involved, or selfish attitude. Instead, the pope warned against wasting one's life by spending it merely on oneself. He admonished the youth to begin living life more fully by giving of one's youth. When he noted that Jesus too was a young person, Pope Francis highlighted that Jesus used his youth as a time of preparation; Christ's youth "was training, being prepared to carry out the Father's plan."

Further, Pope Francis clearly stated that "it must not be thought that Jesus was a withdrawn adolescent of a self-absorbed youth" but rather that he "shared fully in the life of his family and his people."

In chapter five, the Holy Father went even further to challenge us all: "I hope that you will be serious enough about yourselves to make an effort to grow spiritually Adults, too, have to mature without losing the values of youth Growing older means preserving and cherishing the most precious things about our youth, but it also involves having to purify those things that are not good and receiving new gifts from God so we can develop the things that really matter." In these brief words, Pope Francis makes it very clear that he does not see youth as the goal, but the process of purification and growth towards real maturity, which requires certain characteristics.

Specifically, the pope discouraged self-centered religion by teaching that one's "spiritual growth is expressed above all by ... growth in fraternal, generous, and merciful love." God's love must "take us out of ourselves," he wrote. When a person (young or old) is tempted to withdraw or turn in on oneself, they must persevere in seeing God's image in others, even those who have hurt us.

Rather than tolerating or encouraging the temptation to remain free and unattached from responsibilities, the pope instructed us that it is a gift to commit one's youth (and one's life) to God. This commitment must "go beyond [one's] small groups and ... build 'social friendship, where everyone works for the common good'"

What I had mistakenly perceived as a toothless endorsement of sentimentality about youth was, in fact, nothing of the sort.

Pope Francis has sharp criticism for the way our current culture does not celebrate youth but “exploits the image of the young. Beauty is associated with a youthful appearance, cosmetic treatments that hide the traces of time. The ideal of beauty is youth, but we need to realize that this has very little to do with young people. It only means that adults want to snatch youth for themselves, not that they respect, love, and care for young people.”

In a few short words, Pope Francis underscores what is happening with our cultural obsession with youth: it is the sickness of adults, not the youth. He points out that “sometimes... adults try to imitate young people, thus inverting the relationship between generations.”

The exhortation is a convicting and encouraging document for all of us. The heart of it is not merely for young people but is a call to rededicate all of one’s energies (regardless of age) to growth in spiritual maturity while not losing the gift of a heart that remains young in Christ.