

# ISSUE BULLETIN

Examining Critical Issues in Faithful Catholic Education

September 24, 2018

## **Authentic Accompaniment: A Better Way for the Synod**

By Dan Guernsey, Ed.D.

**T**he working document guiding the Synod on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment focuses on encouraging adults to accompany youth as they face new experiences and challenges. Regrettably, its accompaniment/discernment model falls short in three respects:

1. it downplays the role of the adult,
2. it downplays Church teaching and objective truth (reality), and
3. it is overly fearful of rejection by young people.

As the bishops prepare to discuss the best ways to accompany youth in their October synod, they may benefit from the following insights from Monsignor Luigi Giussani, a modern master on the accompaniment of youth.

### **Accompaniment Properly Understood**

---

Giussani (1922-2005) influenced the last three popes, especially through his teaching on the pedagogy of encounter and accompaniment. Giussani was a Catholic priest in Italy who was both a high school and seminary teacher as well as the founder of the influential Communion and Liberation movement. Pope Saint John Paul II named him Honorary Prelate to His Holiness. Cardinal Ratzinger, two months before becoming Pope Benedict XVI, presided over Giussani's funeral Mass with more than 40,000 people in attendance. Although Pope Francis never personally met Giussani, he said of him, "For many years now his writings have inspired me to reflect and have helped me to pray. They have taught me to be a better Christian."<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Jorge Mario Bergoglio, "For Man."

Giussani's impact on these three popes is in part due to his insight that relationship and witness are among the best ways to stimulate the youth to commit to Christ. Giussani also emphasizes that the way to break through the cynicism and despair facing youth is to offer them an education that speaks to the deepest needs of the human heart, as God made it, and with an eye on the transcendent. He warns that errant cultural influences and the teen's own impulsivity and impatience might obscure Nature's original reality, power, and beauty. This rejection of reality, he warns, can then allow the teen to be fooled into creating his own standards and thus be at the mercy of whims and outside forces.

Giussani's solution is to ensure that Catholic teachers and ministers act as stabilizing witnesses of a lived Catholic worldview and culture. This interpretive framework helps provide meaning to all reality and gets young people to commit to Christ as they progress into ever greater autonomy and authentic freedom based in truth.

His process works like this:

1. The adult correctly sets up a proposal of a total meaning of reality via a Catholic "tradition" or worldview that is coherent and lived by the adult. This is the best way of providing certainty to the young person.
2. The adult stimulates the young person to confront and personally commit to the verification of the proposal in his own life and test it against reality. This is the best way of ensuring free and true conviction.

In presenting this Catholic worldview in word and deed, the adult must not be indecisive, indifferent, neutral, or hesitant but offer it simply, clearly, and naturally, in full knowledge that the adolescent may still exercise his freedom to reject what he is offered. This is what Giussani calls "the risk of education."<sup>2</sup>

## **Adult Guidance and Discipline**

Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican Secretary of State, remarked in January that the Vatican seeks "a new relationship between the Church and young people, based on a paradigm of responsibility exempt from any paternalism."<sup>3</sup> Paternalism seems to be used here as a pejorative term referencing any attempt to limit a person's autonomy to promote their good.

---

---

<sup>2</sup> Luigi Giussani, "The Risk of Education: Discovering Our Ultimate Destiny." The Crossroad Publishing Company; Reprint edition (August 1, 2001). Available at: <https://www.amazon.com/Risk-Education-Discovering-Ultimate-Destiny/dp/0824518993>

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Brockhaus, "Youth to be Vatican's focus in 2018, Cardinal Parolin says." Catholic News Agency. Available at: <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/youth-to-be-vaticans-focus-in-2018-parolin-says-11138>

For an adult, paternalism is usually inappropriate, but by its nature youth is a time when responsibility is not yet fully developed. Providing young people with structure and rules while they grow in freedom and responsibility is something that teachers, coaches, and parents do all the time, as they strengthen young people for success in academics, athletics, and adult life. To abandon the Church's role as mother and leave youth to their own designs is just abandoning them to other forces.<sup>4</sup> Youth will get those standards and ends from somewhere.

Giussani reminds those who work with young people that youth can be fooled into thinking they have created their own standards, when in fact they are at the mercy of their desires, whether by prejudices dictated by youthful narrowness or ignorance or by outside forces leading them to harm. Freedom requires the use of guiding standards and a clear understanding of proper ends. The role of Catholic mentors is to present and live another way, so as to provide the youth with compelling options counter to the world.

The Synod's working document describes a mentor in part as "a confidant without judgement" who "should not lead young people as passive followers but walk alongside them" (132).

However, "a confidant without judgement" is a role better played by a young person's casual friend than by a mentor. Lack of input by adults in the life of youth may be interpreted as approval or indifference to a situation, precisely when the adults' gifts and wisdom are most needed and even expected. The adult must discern the best way to help the mentee grow in the truth. That need not preclude offering definitive guidance in the right place and time, and even definitive judgement.

It is also helpful to remember that "following" is not necessarily passive. Graduate students follow the guidance of professors in conducting their own research, and professional athletes follow their coaches. Radical autonomy is rare, even in adult life. Adults often need to follow other adults on the path to greater health, holiness, and wisdom. Caring guides walk beside, before, or even behind those they lead, depending on the situation at hand.

## **Clear Church Teaching**

---

From the get-go, the synod document seems so intent on emphasizing the need to meet youth where they are, that the more important reality of "where do youth ultimately need to be?" goes unstated.

It is a best practice to start with the end in mind; in this case, the goal is for young people to be free and intentional disciples. The document, however, simply emphasizes a generic three-step discernment process—1. Recognize, 2. Interpret, 3. Choose—and the document itself is structured this way. But without clarifying a specific end, the process could be used in driver's

---

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Dan Guernsey, "Should the Church Be a Permissive Parent?" Cardinal Newman Society (September 4, 2018). Available at: <https://newmansociety.org/should-the-church-be-a-permissive-parent/>

training or in career training, as much as in spiritual direction. Instead, a spiritual discernment process always needs to keep the goal of salvation in Christ clear and compelling, while acknowledging that salvation cannot be forced and can be freely rejected.

Earlier we saw how the document suggest adults walk beside and not judge youth, and in other places the document advises that mentors “do” rather than “say.” Specifically it tells adults “to realize they are a model that can influence others through what they are, rather than for what they do or suggest” (130, emphasis added). But this is not a “rather than” situation; it requires “both and.” It may be that the mentor is the instrument the Holy Spirit has sent to speak the words of eternal life to the young person. That must not be preemptively ruled out.

Self-imposed silence of God’s Word in the face of the real needs of youth could be akin to the story of the Good Samaritan, where the righteous pass by thinking, “Surely God or someone else will tend this wounded soul.” St. Paul explicitly exhorts us to “preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching” (2 Tim 4:2). Vatican II states, “nor is it enough to carry out an apostolate by way of example... they are to announce Christ to their non-Christian fellow-citizens by word and examples and to aid them toward the full reception of Christ.”<sup>5</sup> Adults should ensure that the young have the truths of the faith and God’s Word before them. The youth have a right to know what we know and believe what we believe, which sometimes entails hearing the Word directly from us. Who else will tell them, if not us?

In other places the document seems to take a Rogerian non-directive and hands-off approach to discernment.<sup>6</sup> Such an approach discourages offering clear guidance and, by extension, clear Church teaching or Gospel truth. It views discernment as

a pastoral instrument, that is able to identify liveable pathways today’s young people can follow, and to provide guidance and suggestions for the mission that are not ready-made, but are the fruit of a journey that enables us to follow the Spirit. A pathway that is structured in this way invites us to open and not to close, to ask questions without suggesting pre-defined answers, to point to alternatives and probe opportunities. (2)

Perhaps if we did not know the meaning or end of life, the salvific role of Christ, and the moral teachings of the Church, this approach might make unqualified sense. But we know that the door is closed to many things, not the least of which are “evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, debauchery, envy, slander, arrogance, and

---

<sup>5</sup> “Ad Gentes: On the Mission Activity of the Church.” Holy See. Available at: [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651207\\_ad-gentes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html)

<sup>6</sup> “Carl Rogers.” Wikipedia. Available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl\\_Rogers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl_Rogers)

foolishness” (Mk 22) and everything else which defiles us. Each of these has a pre-defined answer with no alternative or opportunity other than the clear call to repentance and holiness.

Adults must be sure and stable guides to youth. We must provide and model real answers from a Christian world-view, otherwise we have no business assisting them in the discernment process. Giussani emphasizes that an adult working with youth must present the truth which inspires him and then step back behind its overshadowing presence and be a living witness of love. This is often the key that will engrave the teacher in the student’s memory and engender feelings of fondness from the student.

### **Patience Without Fear of Rejection**

---

The mentor puts himself at emotional risk in working with the youth. It is only natural and human for the mentor to hope and expect that the youth will respond with fondness to him or her as a person. And it is only natural and human to hope and expect that once the truth is laid out before the youth and clearly modeled in the person of the mentor, the student will “get it.” But in fact, the young person must be free to reject it all—and that rejection may be humiliating and hurtful to the adult.

For Giussani, it is precisely the risk of confrontation and rejection that helps create the young person’s personality in his authentic relationship to all things; it is here that he develops his freedom. The reality of rejection provides a real and clear inflection point: the point of risk and freedom.

This risk of rejection by youth is at the heart of accompaniment; we should not give in at the end and surrender truth to avoid being hurt or abandoned by the youth. Like the father of the prodigal son, we remain sadly behind, hoping for a return after the loving seeds of truth have been planted. The father neither follows the prodigal into the peripheries with enabling moneybags nor, as Anthony Esolen has observed, does he allow the son to re-enter his home unrepentant with alcohol and whores in tow.<sup>7</sup> Rather, the father waits patiently hoping for a free return to the fullness of truth and life.

Compare such Gospel confidence and acceptance of youthful rejection to the Synod document, which worries that if we don’t let youth do what they want, in their way, and without comment, then we must either be “unbending judges” or “hyperprotective parents” who are responsible for driving them away:

...the Church “is brought into being” with young people, by allowing them to be true protagonists without telling them “it has always been done this way”... They expect to be

---

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Esolen and Fr. Mark Pilon, “The Synod: In Poetry and Prose.” *The Catholic Thing* (October 29, 2015). Available at: <https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2015/10/29/the-synod-in-poetry-and-prose/>

accompanied not by an unbending judge, nor by a fearful and hyperprotective parent who generates dependence, but by someone who is not afraid of his weakness and is able to make the treasure it holds within, like an earthen vessel, shine. Otherwise, they will ultimately turn elsewhere, especially at a time when there is no shortage of alternatives. (142)

Again, the synod document seems to suggest a lesser role for adults; after all, the youth are the “true protagonists,” so it is supposedly necessary to shrink our role in the hopes they might decide to stay with us. But by definition a protagonist is simply a leading character, not the only character. In any good story the leading character will confront challenging realities presented by others that result either in growing in freedom and virtue or falling into vice and ruin. Adults must play their part, even if it risks ruin.

We have to at some point risk rejection and make “The Ask”: to speak the words of Christ, “Come follow Me.” We must lovingly show them that Christ and His Church present a different way—a path out of contemporary shallowness and despair. We enter their world, no matter what world they are in, to show them the beauty and wonder of God’s world and point the way to Christ. We accompany them, sometimes by their side, sometimes leading them, but always in word and example, pointing the way to truth and proposing meaning, so that they might come to love Him, know Him, and—in their own turn—share Him with the world, even at great risk.

*Dr. Dan Guernsey is the director of K-12 programs for The Cardinal Newman Society, which promotes and defends faithful Catholic education. He has 13 years’ experience as a high school principal and has served an associate professor and education department chair at the university level. He and his wife Lisa have 6 children.*