

# Vatican Synod on Youth

The World Synod on Youth began last week at the Vatican and will continue for almost the whole month, indicating the contemporary importance of the topic. The Church has never previously organized this kind of symposium on youth. During the summer, Pope Francis dialogued with groups of youth from around the world, soliciting their ideas and opinions in an open, honest discussion, whether it accorded or not with traditional Church teaching, setting a more collaborative style of leadership in the Church and, for that matter, any institution. Collaboration is a process which accepts that all the answers to issues cannot be resolved solely by invoking past formulas. It looks in fresh directions for new insights, seeking counsel especially from the people who will be most affected by the decisions. The Pope, therefore, started first with the youth, recommending that the Church dream with them about the future. Accordingly, “the Church must listen to the voices, the sensibilities, the faith and even the doubts and criticisms of young people.”

This Synod on Youth is very different from the World Youth events started by Pope John Paul II. These are more festive, celebratory occasions with an international flair, showing how catholic or universal the Church really is. They present a compelling, attractive experience of the Church which youth will never forget. This Synod is a more serious and focused endeavor which involved the participation of young people in establishing the ultimate agenda, even though only bishops will be in attendance. This is the same process Pope Francis used in the two previous Synods on the Laity and Family when he polled the faithful, asking them about their experiences and needs. This was primarily a pastoral, rather than doctrinal, approach, similar to the style Jesus showed in the Gospels, clearly placing the practical concerns of people over the idealized requirements of the Law.

Large meetings rarely accomplish very much. At the Synod the bishops will listen to a lot of speeches and also meet in small discussion groups. Perhaps they can agree on a general approach which shows a familiarity with the current world and attempts to engage with young people on the issues they face. This almost certainly will require an emphasis on social issues, e.g., non-violence, equality, ecology, and justice. These are core Gospel themes which resonate with most young people. The Church already possesses the spirituality which youth are craving. It has become, alas, ineffective at communicating these values. Youth also are looking for vibrant communities. The Church has a whole network of active communities in its parishes and schools but again these are not always welcoming or dynamic environments. The Church will have to project a wholly different image, less authoritarian, more tolerant and open, if it hopes to attract the youth of today.