

My dear friends, as always it is a great joy to be with you. I feel a special connection with catechists, teachers, and formators. Many years as a young priest I was engaged in these very ministries, and even now, as a bishop, one of my most important roles is to be a teacher of the faith. So, I want you to know that I appreciate so much your hard work, your dedication, and your generosity of spirit. Your generosity speaks to my heart and to the hearts of thousands of the faithful and their children in this Archdiocesan Church of San Antonio.

I want to share with you today some reflections of the Holy Father, Pope Francis, from his Apostolic Letter after the Synod on Youth. It is called *Christus Vivit*, which means, Christ is alive! I will comment on the title in just a moment. But first, I want to tell you to read the letter prayerfully, if you haven't already. I say this because there are summaries of the letter and commentaries on the letter available, and they are OK in summarizing the Holy Father's ideas. However, they do not capture the "feel" of the letter. Our Holy Father has a particular voice. He speaks in a personal and fatherly way. I have experienced this, myself, just recently when Bishop Mike and I were in Rome for our *ad limina* visit with him. He speaks as a loving father, in a personal and intimate way. When you read the full letter, which is not long, at all, you feel the sense that he is speaking to you, personally. Truly, you can hear the voice of the shepherd as you read the full text. It's like being in spiritual direction, or being on a short retreat. Do yourself a favor and read the full text, please!

And so, *Christus Vivit!* Christ is alive! The Holy Father's exhortation is directed toward youth and those who work with youth,

and finally to the whole Church -- because youth and young adults are not simply the Church's future, but as the Pope reminds us, they are a part of us now! But why focus first by saying, "Christ is alive!" Because, first and foremost, being part of the Church is about having a relationship with the risen and living Christ! We cannot reduce Christ to a mere figure from history, from the past. We cannot reduce him to an idea, a philosophy, or as a mere subject to be studied. We cannot reduce Jesus to a doctrine or a catechesis, though doctrine and catechesis is important. No, we cannot reduce Christ in any way! We cannot make of Jesus a dead figure when he is alive, risen, and present among his people now! For our youth to have faith, they must first have a living relationship with a living person, and that living person is Jesus! If Jesus is, for us, only a subject, an idea, a character from history, the founder of a philosophy or of a humanistic ethics, then he is only a memory to us, and not a living presence. The Holy Father insists that the first step of encounter for our youth, and truly for all of us, is the encounter with Christ alive and risen from the dead!

How is this communicated to our youth? It is communicated by the sharing of our own faith, the testimony of Christ's presence in our own lives, and our willingness to share that story with them. This requires humility on our part, because very often our story is the story of our turning away from sin and toward Christ as he beckons us, calls us toward himself. It is the living testimony of people like St. Augustine who tells us of his conversion. It is the story of Francis of Assisi who shares his conversion humbly with others. It is the testimony of the young Therese of Lisieux, who shares her

passionate love for Christ. This, the Holy Father reminds us, is the proclamation of the *kerygma*, the very encounter with the living person of Christ, who saves us!

Pope Francis recalls the teaching of Pope St. Paul VI who reminded us that catechesis without *kerygma* is dead. Knowing about God, knowing about Christ, is a dead knowledge without a living relationship with the risen Jesus. The Pope chides those who think that this *kerygmatic* knowledge is less important than *serious* doctrinal knowledge. An atheist can have all the knowledge of doctrine, but only a disciple can have a living faith! This in no way is meant to diminish the role of knowing the Church's correct doctrine. But rather, it sets the correct place for doctrine to be known and taught -- and that is within the context of a faith that is alive *because* Christ is alive in the heart of the young person!

What is *kerygma*? We hear the kerygma all over the New Testament. "I was blind, but now I see." "I was lame but now I walk." "I was hungry and he fed me." "I was dead in my sin and he forgave me." "I was walking away from Jerusalem, sad and dejected, on my way to Emmaus. He came to me as a stranger, a fellow traveler, and explained the scriptures in detail. When he broke the bread I suddenly knew him! Now, I must return to Jerusalem, to my community with great haste and share the message that he is alive! We knew him in the breaking of the bread!" "I was on my way to Damascus with letters permitting me to root out the followers of the Nazarene from the synagogues there when suddenly I was blinded and thrown to the ground. I heard his voice as he asked me why I

was persecuting him. One of his disciples in Damascus came to me, received my profession of faith, and my sight was restored.”

Kerygma is St. Francis kissing the leper. It is Dorothy Day gathering the poor in New York City. It is St. Theresa of Calcutta comforting the dying in the streets of India. It is St. Jose del Rio standing up for Christ the King in the face of official persecution in Mexico. It is Thomas Merton seeking the lover of his soul in contemplation before the Lord. It is the teen who accompanies her friend in a time of failure. It is the grandson who bathes and feeds his aged grandparents. These are experiences of life! They are life-changing! They are irreducible to a concept or idea! They are living encounters with a living Lord Jesus Christ!

What, then, is our role? The Holy Father calls us first to be witnesses, ourselves, as I have said. He also calls us to facilitate the opportunities for encounter with the living Christ through our youth ministries and programs of catechesis -- and even through our institutions like our schools. The Pope calls us not only to teach doctrine, to catechize in the traditional sense, but even more, to promote among our youth encounters with the poor, opportunities to serve, and to tap into the natural energies and joy of our youth in retreats, gatherings, sports, and social experiences.

Most of all, the Pope asks us not to be discouraged! He knows that we are facing a world that distracts our young people. That we deal with parents whose own faith is tenuous, at best. That we are surrounded by a culture of exploitation, isolation, and that replaces real experiences for “virtual” experiences. But it is in this world, exactly, where our mission exists! Let us utilize the world of social

media to connect and evangelize instead of to isolate or exploit! Let us tap the natural generosity and curiosity of our youth in serving the poor. Let us extend their natural joy by calling them to missionary discipleship!

Let us facilitate the possibility of encounter for them! Then the living Christ, in the power and mystery of the Holy Spirit, will move in their hearts!

Finally, the Holy Father calls us to accompany them. Accompany them. That means to walk with them. Beside them. Offering them balance, wisdom, and good example. It does not mean dominating them, controlling them, muting their voices, shaming them for their questions, or judging their mistakes! It means -- accompanying them!!! They will find Christ, and Christ will find them! We are like John the Baptist, pointing to the Lamb of God. We are like Andrew, introducing our brother Simon to the Lord. We are like Barnabas, walking with Paul in the early years of his faith. We are like Paul, offering Timothy guidance. We are like James, gently correcting what is wrong and rebalancing the Church in Jerusalem in the face of new moments of grace.

So, dear friends, please read *Christus Vivit!* Please hear the voice of the Holy Father as he speaks to us, exhorts us, in this wonderful and loving letter to the young, and to us. Finally, let us turn to the living Jesus, ourselves, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, allow the joy of our own youth to be renewed!