

VIETNAMESE YOUTH

LOOKING FORWARD TO SYNOD ON YOUTH

Theme:
“Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment”

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Based on news from the Archdiocese of Saigon

Introduction

1. The 2018 General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome is an assembly special not only to bishops but also to all Catholic youths across the world. It is an event of young people and for young people. Interested in and looking forward to an expectant Synod of Bishops, about 250 young Catholics from several dioceses of Vietnam¹ have responded to the call of the Saigon Archdiocesan Youth Ministry Committee to attend two sessions with Most Reverend Joseph Do Manh Hung, Apostolic Administrator of the Archdiocese of Ho Chi Minh City, to share opinions and thoughts on the topic: *“Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment”*. On two Sundays of April 22 and May 13 (2018), young people were able to speak out their concerns, all of which were listened to attentively by bishop Joseph. This present document summarizes their concluding remarks about some, the challenges in their life of faith they are experiencing, and their expectations they want to convey to the pastors of the Church.

2. The process of the two days of talks helped the young participants realize that discernment is not limited to recognizing priestly or religious vocation, religious or lay life, and religious life or marriage, but also as a process of judgment so as to distinguish between good and evil, to select the means or circumstances to achieve the chosen objectives. The proper discernment in Christianity follows the direction of Wisdom, or *“the Gift of Discernment”*, consisting of three stages: I. Recognizing – II. Interpreting – III. Choosing².

I. Recognizing

3. Reflecting on the **Recognizing** stage, the young friends shared the issues that are affecting the lives of faith of young Catholics in Vietnam in general and of young people in Saigon in particular. These are the six issues that have been discussed:

3.1. *Confusion and hesitance about decisions for the future*

¹ According to statistics, there are an estimated 300,000 young Catholics in Saigon (18-35 years old), and at least 120,000 young Catholics (from other provinces in the country). Thus, the total number of young Catholics in Saigon is about 420,000. (cf. Rev. John Le Quang Viet, *Young Adult - Documentary on the Synod 2018*, p. 5)

² Cf. *Instrumentum Laboris*, n. 3.

Young people dream of achieving success and happiness in life. They are under the influence that success is the ability to make a lot of money and happiness is the ability to own and enjoy many things. So, how to get a lot of money?

Young people plunge into courses in the hope of finding a job that can help them earn a lot of money. Or they fall easy prey to the pleasures of life (parties, gambling, addiction...).

This makes them rush hastily through life. They have lost their desire for inner depth and do not have “*stop and think*” moments for God.

3.2. *Phenomenon of virtual life*

The evolution of social networking makes it easy to connect with young people. Useful information, valuable experience... can be accessed at once with just a “*share*” button.

But social networks are also places to propagate seemingly reasonable but dangerous opinions because these thoughts are contrary to the Good News and the teachings of the Church. To illustrate: recently many young Catholics have signed a petition requesting death to a killer of a Vietnamese little girl in Japan.

3.3. *Easy sex*

Along with social networks, movies, books, stories... are things that are making young people see premarital sex a fashionable trend.

3.4. *Homosexuality*

Young Catholics are increasingly bewildered and feel alienated from the Church’s teachings before events such as:

- Acceptance of same-sex marriages in many countries;
- Marriages of homosexual celebrities;
- The idea “love is always right” praised in many places;
- The opportunity to meet people of the “third gender” and listen to their true feelings, among whom there are our friends and relatives...

3.5. *Abortion*

Uncertainty in finance and work leads to a difficult life that is making young people sympathetic to the justification for abortion.

3.6. *Divorce*

Young people witness unhappy marriages of their parents, siblings or friends, and with the increasing divorce trend in society; therefore, even though unmarried, they tend to undervalue marriage and accept divorce as an escape.

II. Interpreting

4. Facing the six challenges: Questions “Why?”

Despite recognizing the challenges in their life of faith, the young find the **Interpreting** phase not becoming easy to young people. As members of society, they are facing many questions:

- 4.1. Young people want to succeed, want to be happy. That is the ambition, is the legitimate dream of young people. But, they ask themselves: Why am I not “successful”? Is it because I’m poor, I do not have money...? Why am I not “happy”? Is it because I have no luxury vehicle, no fashionable clothes...?
- 4.2. Why refuse the joy of satisfying the need for self-assertion, for being the center of attention, and for admiration when just a mouse “click” I can become a hero on the global online network?
- 4.3. Why do I have to be “old-fashioned” and “less civilized” when insisting that “virginity is worth thousands of gold”?
- 4.4. Why not follow the concepts of some “so-called progressive countries” when I insist on denying the need of homosexual people?
- 4.5. Why not consider myself to be important and the key to choosing abortion for the life of mine, of the unwanted child to avoid the imminent foreseeable pains? By so doing my life, my unwanted baby, and others such as my parents could be happier and less burdensome..., couldn’t they?
- 4.6. Why not choose comfort, joy and happiness but sacrifice myself for my children, to listen to the teaching that God forbids divorce preached by priests who don’t have to undergo the complicated life among disputing family members? God loves all the people and wants them to be comfortable, joyful and happy all the time, doesn’t He?

Rooted in the core concepts of happiness, young people will find the right answer that enables them to reach the goal of true lasting happiness, or they will miss the target when touching the illusion of happiness only, and then it will - sooner or later - break and cause deep pain to themselves and others.

5. In the light of Catholic Social Teaching

We will go into detail about each issue one after another, with the help from social teachings of the Church. The practical catechism so close to young people is “DOCAT”, a popular adaptation of the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*.

More than just a guide to the Christian life, DOCAT is a close friend of young people, the norm that helps young people orient themselves when they are confused and disturbed by too many choices for the future. In the face of such choices, young people need to have principles for reflection and criteria for judgment. The Church has provided a “set of tools” for reflection and judgment, which is a system of **four principles**: *Personhood - the Common Good - Solidarity - Subsidiarity* (DOCAT, 84), and **four values**: *Truth - Justice - Freedom - Love* (DOCAT, 104-109).

5.1. True success, true happiness

The very desires to succeed and find happiness are legitimate aspirations of man. But whether we can succeed in bringing about a true and lasting happiness depends on how well we know the full **truth** about man. That means in addition to his physical body (beautiful shape, good health...), his psychological aspects

(life skills, social communications...), and his intellectual abilities (knowledge, academic degrees...), man has the part of spirituality which is often forgotten.

True success, therefore, which leads to true happiness depends not only on having money, beauty and knowledge, but also on maintaining a good relationship with everybody. In fact, “we can be happy only in good relationships with others” (DOCAT, 26). This can be done when we live and act based on the **four principles** and **four values** mentioned above. “The permanent principles of the Church’s social doctrine... constitute the very heart of Catholic social teaching” (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, hereinafter briefly referred to as “*Compendium*”, 160). The Bible affirms, “*Living the truth in love, we should grow in every way*” (Eph 4:15).

5.2. *Be true to yourself and announce the truth*

Social networking is a tool for people all over the world to communicate and connect with each other, to overcome barriers in space and culture. Each person not only receives information, but also produces it. Therefore, in engaging in social networking, the user must clearly understand their responsibility (DOCAT, 42). First of all, be selective and spread the **truth** in wisdom: “*When it comes to news, think of the ‘three sieves’ of Socrates: Is it true? Is it kind? Is it helpful?*” (YOUCAT, 457).

This truth must be expressed in **love**. Although the information is for the purpose of denunciation, it must be aimed at a good value, such as desiring the matter will be improved, preventing bad information from being spread... Do not humiliate anybody or “share”, “like” what may offend somebody, undermining his **dignity**. For example: Post pictures and “share”, “like” articles insulting some crèche teachers who maltreat their pupils.

An important responsibility many young people today do not care about is that they have to **be true to themselves** when communicating on social networks. When living in the virtual world, social network users would think they could make decisions on quite a few matters, based on a virtual power (they might deceive themselves into believing they are being adored and “*liked*” on social networks). But are their self-worth really so? In fact, they are deceiving themselves when being not true to themselves, because power and self-worth exist in real life only while social networking is nothing but a means to convey information and ideas.

Another responsibility DOCAT wants to remind social network users is respect the **truth** and the principle of **solidarity**. “People can use media in a way that results in useless information and meaningless entertainment; in this way, one can prevent others from living the real life” (DOCAT, 44), because “solidarity means to intentionally support people in a positive way for them to live well” (DOCAT, 102). Therefore, when “*sharing, liking, commenting*” some information, we get involved and are not innocent: we are playing the role of an information producer, and we must be responsible for the principle of solidarity.

On the contrary, even though we do announce thoughts and information based on the Church’s viewpoints, we should do it in a spirit of solidarity, not forgetting to open our hearts to listen to other viewpoints, encouraging others to participate, so that they themselves as well as all of us come to recognize and understand what the truth is. For the principles of **solidarity** and **subsidiarity** are closely related to the construction of a better society.

Finally, it is the responsibility of each person himself, “*since I should enter into true community with others through the media instead of shutting myself off in self-centered ‘virtual’ isolation from other people and their real needs*” (DOCAT, 42). This is the principle of **personhood**, i.e., a person is someone who has to live with his/her relationships. Social networks cannot completely replace face-to-face human relationships. To illustrate: Among a whole group drinking coffee, or in a family dinner, each person is a

private world of his/her own with a “*smartphone*” in the hand. This is what the Holy Father often warns against.

5.3. *True love*

In DOCAT, we can also find definitive answers to the pre-marital sex movement that is gradually “normalizing” among young people. “To marry someone means to give oneself completely to that person: husband and wife should live together and be there for each other, with their whole physical and mental constitution. Family embraces all areas of life. It is in marriage, where sexual union has its just place, that the **love** of a man and a woman becomes fruitful” (DOCAT, 124). Only in marriage, as a sacrament, does the physical intimacy of the spouses become a sacred act and open to spiritual communion, that means the principle of **personhood** is respected in its true sense (cf. DOCAT, 125; CCC, 2360).

- Under current trends, premarital sex is often interpreted as the choice of freedom and self-responsibility of the couple. In fact, “true freedom is not the ability to choose whatever is good or bad, but the ability to choose good” (DOCAT, 106). Therefore, premarital sex does not aim at the true value of **freedom**.
- In addition, premarital sexual relations may lead to abortions, infection of sexually transmitted diseases due to a self-indulgence lifestyle and may result in children who lack a parent. This act violates the principle of **solidarity**, adversely affecting society and the life of others (DOCAT, 126).
- And it cannot be denied that life is **real**, so trial living is meaningless: trial living is not living, but only existing. Trial love is not the true love, but is merely a covered lust, often hiding an abuse. Can you try death? - “One cannot live a trial life or die a trial death. One cannot live a trial basis or accept a person on trial and for a limited time” (Saint Pope John Paul II, in YOUCAT, p. 219).

5.4. *Respect the dignity of homosexuals*

Continuing to illuminate these issues in the light of the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the Catholic Social Doctrine, young people will easily recognize and further understand the Church’s clear views on the issue of homosexuality.

- “The Church believes that in the order of creation, man and woman are designed to need each other’s **complementary traits** and enter into a **mutual relationship** so as to give life to children. Therefore, that is why homosexual practices cannot be approved by the Church” (YOUCAT, 65).
- A homosexual orientation in a human being is often influenced and formed by many factors. “It is a painful experience for many homosexually oriented people that they do not feel erotically attracted to the opposite sex and necessarily miss out on the physical fruitfulness of the union between man and woman according to human nature and the divine order of creation. Nevertheless, God often leads souls to himself along unusual paths: a lack, a loss, or a wound - if accepted and affirmed - can become a springboard for throwing oneself into the arms of God” (YOUCAT 65); therefore, the Church does not condemn those having a homosexual tendency but respects the human **dignity** that God has given them.
- It is noteworthy that the “unnatural” type of sex, such as anal or oral sex (breach of the value of **truth**), is inconsistent with the structure created by God in the body of man and woman, so homosexual acts easily spread dangerous diseases incurable so far (HIV, HPV...), causing damage to life. Statistic data in Vietnam

and the United States show that homosexual sex is the most common route of transmission of these diseases³.

- An objective truth is that it is impossible to make the partnership between two persons of the same sex fruitful through the transmission of life (breach of the value of **love**) according to the plan inscribed by God in the very structure of the human being (Compendium, 228).
- Connected with de facto unions is the particular problem concerning demands for the legal recognition of unions between homosexual persons. Recognizing the right to marriage of homosexual persons would be tantamount to putting homosexual unions on a legal plane analogous to that of marriage and the family of the spouses with full familial responsibilities and duties would mean being **unjust** to the spouses in the true sense of husband and wife. The concept of marriage would undergo a radical transformation, with **grave detriment to the common good**, especially to such homosexual persons' adopted children who need sentiments of both father and mother (Compendium, 228).

In summary, sympathy and respect for the **dignity** of persons with a homosexual orientation is rightful and necessary, as taught by the Church, but we know that the **truth** is a value that must be respected. Only when the truth is also respected can each and every person and the whole society be truly and completely developed.

5.5. Respect life

It is a bad situation that the number of abortions increases terribly because this violates the values and principles set out in the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church.

- First of all, this action violates the principle of **personhood**, because the fetus is a person but is considered “something” not worth existing and deprived of its inviolable dignity.
- Abortion terminates the development of the baby in the fetus, which goes against the principle of **solidarity**, which means we must love others and want them to develop.
- This “killing” act is conducted against a fetus incapable of defending itself, a serious offense against the value of **justice**.
- And while **freedom** means always choosing the good, abortion is gravely contrary to the moral law.

Considering this issue in the light of Catholic social teaching, can financial instability and job insecurity be justified for killing a child?

5.6. Respect happiness and love in marriage

An issue related to family life and also in violation of the values and principles of the Church's social teaching is divorce.

- Divorce hurts the **dignity** of both parents and children (the principle of **personhood**). The family is a place where people are loved unconditionally for their dignity and for being family members. Divorce is denying and rejecting each other, disregarding the dignity of the spouse, and rejecting the responsibility to raise children in a loving home harmonious with their dignity, thus undermining the dignity of their children.

³ <https://tuoitre.vn/nhiem-hiv-tu-quan-he-dong-gioi-20180521095039444.htm> and <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/statistics/overview/ata glance.html>.

- Divorce violates the principle of **solidarity** because it breaks the bond between the members and disrupts the family.
- The family itself is also a source of the **common good** for society. It is in the family that parents apply, and educate their children to live, the principle of **subsidiarity** among the family members and they all work together for the common good.

Thus, divorce breaks the principles of subsidiarity and the common good.

- Divorce violates all the four values of **truth, justice, freedom** and **love**, because the characteristic of marriage is the vow of eternal bonding: to love unconditionally and to remain faithful, to respect each other; divorce is the misuse of freedom to betray love; marriage annulment is unfair to one's spouse, unjust to the right of the children to be loved and brought up; and divorce also demonstrates that the truth of the noble human dignity, of love with a noble dimension, of the true meaning of freedom and justice is not fully and integrally understood.

“Salvation, the definitive wholeness and perfect happiness that is granted to us through Jesus Christ, is not something that only a few people can attain. God wants the salvation of all mankind. This salvation liberates man in all his dimensions: as body and spirit, personally and socially, in his earthly history and forever in heaven. In history, and therefore in the time in which we find ourselves, this salvation is already dawning; however, it will be perfect only in eternity. Hence we must reject all political ideologies that promise salvation already on earth. The fact that we will find paradise only in heaven is not a consolation prize, nor is it disdain for the world. Rather, because of our hope for eternal life, we can shape the here and now in justice and love. Nothing good that we do here on earth is in vain; rather, it is taken up into the perfection of eternity” (DOCAT, 17).

III. Choosing

6. To sum up, DOCAT will help young people have a solid doctrinal and moral foundation to enter the **Choosing** stage, the most important and difficult phase of the process. For from perception to action, courage and renewed **power of the Holy Spirit** are required. For the above trends are always so beautiful and passionate, sometimes very real, so attached to the life of young people that it is difficult for them to give up or dare to choose a direction opposite to the trend of the times. As Saint Paul himself says, *“For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want”* (Rom 7:19).

7. At this stage young people need **practical help**, in the first place, for 80% of the four hundred thousand young Catholics of Saigon, who are still unfamiliar with the archdiocesan youth activities. *More playgrounds* are needed to gather them (such as youth day, meetings, spiritual retreats or youth camps...), or *study courses* that help both deepen their life of faith and provide necessary skills for their everyday life.

8. In these playgrounds, young people need **accompaniment** of bishops, priests, religious, or parents and specialists in various fields... to share with them valuable knowledge and experiences that can only be enriched by fostering and learning over time. These are the very things that they are lacking and inadequate to.

9. In addition, the small contingent of core young people who are currently collaborating and engaging in church activities in this way or another need to be supported and **trained more deeply** in all aspects so that they continue to be the extended arms of the Church and become apostles to other young people.

10. With a **constant collaboration** between various associations and individuals, the renewing grace of the Spirit will be active in young people, inexperienced but enthusiastic, inadequate but potential, temperamental but very creative, so they will actively engage in the activities of the Church and in their daily living environments.

Conclusion

11. Together with young people of the world, we Vietnamese young people wish to “choose Jesus” as the only Savior, and are determined to fulfill the dream of the Holy Father:

“I wish I had a million young Christians or, even better, a whole generation who are for their contemporaries ‘walking, talking social doctrine’. Nothing else will change the world but people who with Jesus devote themselves to it, who with him go to the margins and right into the middle of the dirt.” (Introduction, DOCAT, 2015).

The Vietnamese Youth, 2018

Two delegate Vietnamese bishops for Synod 2018:

1. Bishop Peter Nguyen Van Vien, Auxiliary Bishop of the Vinh diocese.
2. Bishop Joseph Do Manh Hung, Apostolic Administrator of the Archdiocese of Saigon.

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Supplemental notes

(Source: youcat.org/products/docat)

DOCAT: Social doctrine of the Catholic Church, 1st edition published on July 26, 2016, on the occasion of the World Youth Day, Krakow, Poland.

In the Foreword of DOCAT Pope Francis wrote:

“The English verb “to do” is part of the title. DOCAT answers the question: “What should we do?”; it is like a user’s manual that helps us to change ourselves with the Gospel first, and then our closest surroundings, and finally the whole world. For with the power of the Gospel, we can truly change the world.”

YOUCAT: Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church, originally introduced in August 2011 during the World Youth Day in Madrid, Spain.

In the Foreword of YOUCAT Pope Benedict XVI wrote:

“So I invite you: Study this Catechism! That is my heartfelt desire. This Catechism was not written to please you. It will not make life easy for you, because it demands of you a new life. It places before you the Gospel message as the “pearl of great value” (Mt 13:46) for which you must give everything. So I beg you: Study this Catechism with passion and perseverance.”