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Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Robert E. Barron addresses the 2015 World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia Sept. 22, 2015. (CNS photo/Jeffrey Bruno)



by Heidi Schlumpf

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The upcoming synod on young people is an opportunity for evangelization, especially to those who have left the Catholic Church or organized religion altogether, said one of the bishop delegates ratified by Pope Francis this week.

"I don't know any issue more pressing now in the life of the church than addressing the problem of the massive attrition of our own people, especially the young," Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Robert Barron told NCR in an email interview.

"How to re-engage the 'nones,' and to prevent the rise of future 'nones,' should be, in my judgment, priority one in the Catholic Church," Barron said, referring to those who would check "none" on a survey of religious affiliation.

Approximately one third of all Americans ages 18-33 are characterized as religiously disaffiliated, according to a 2015 study from the Pew Research Center.

For that reason, Barron believes the worldwide Synod on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment, to be held Oct. 3-28 at the Vatican, is even more significant than the previous two synods on the family held in 2014 and 2015.

The five bishop delegates, announced July 23, are Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, Archbishop José Gomez of Los Angeles, Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia, Bishop Frank Caggiano of Bridgeport, Connecticut and Barron.

Barron, who is chair of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis, said he will argue for the need for "a new apologetics and for substantial improvement in our catechetical outreach," because he believes young people do not adequately understand church teaching.

But young people themselves and the synod's working document call for accompaniment, not apologetics. In fact, the purpose of the synod is "to accompany all young people, without exception, towards the joy of love," according to *Instrumentum Laboris*, the synod's working document, which was released in late June.

The synod calls for a "spiritual attitude" of discernment, characterized by "openness to new things, courage to move outwards and resistance to the temptation of reducing what is new to what we already know," the working document says.

Several bishops' conferences also noted that traditional catechesis "does not always enjoy a good reputation among young people, because it reminds many of them of 'a compulsory and unchosen path in their childhood,' " the working document said, quoting a response from an online questionnaire of youth and young adults conducted last year.

In addition to that survey, which garnered low participation in the U.S. and may not be representative, synod organizers consulted bishops' conferences, ecclesial movements, associations and experts in the fields of young people and vocational discernment.

In March, more than 300 young adult delegates, including five from the United States, met for six days in Rome for a pre-synod gathering designed to gain input from young Catholics ages 16 to 29. A 16-page pre-synodal document was drafted by the young people after meeting in language groups and consulting with some 15,000 others via social media.

The young Catholics acknowledged that some in their generation — "irrespective of their level of understanding of Church teaching" — want to change teaching on so-called "polemical issues" such as same-sex marriage and use of contraception, or "at least have access to a better explanation and to more formation on these questions," the pre-synod document said.

The document also frequently mentioned the role of women in the church.

Barron said he appreciated the candor in the pre-synodal document, including the young people's desire for a more conciliatory tone for those who do not subscribe to church teaching on sexual matters.

His own work with young people, through his Word on Fire evangelical media ministry, confirms that the church's sexual teachings are one of the major reasons young people leave the church, he said.

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While admitting that "a tone of thundering denunciation would almost certainly not be effective," Barron believes the young people in the pre-synod document were asking "not so much for new doctrines, but for better and more convincing explanations of the Church's controversial teachings," he said.

A study about why young Catholics leave the faith, released this year by St. Mary's Press, found three main reasons: a negative familial or ecclesial experience, uncertainty and lack of engagement with a faith community or active rejection of specific teachings.

A church that proposes, rather than imposes, as Pope John Paul II said, would be appropriate, according to Barron.

The young people he communicates with online through Word on Fire have questions about God, religion and the church. Those questions indicate not alienation but rather "an implicit fascination and a desire for connection," Barron said.

"I believe they would like the Holy Father to know that they are still in the game, still eager to learn, still hungry — even when on the surface they might seem angry or disaffected," he said.

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Barron has been holding listening sessions in his region of the Los Angeles Archdiocese and will have a daylong event for young people two weeks before he leaves for the synod. Word on Fire also will host a Facebook live session to allow others to communicate with Barron before October.

"I believe that the Synod should follow Pope Francis's exhortation to get out of the sacristies and go to the existential margins, that is to say, to those who have lost a sense of God and of transcendent meaning," he said.

At least one other bishop delegate has consulted with young people, although it is unclear how widely. In April, Chaput shared a letter from an anonymous traditionalist young father who urged the church to offer more "clarity and authoritative guidance" on sexual issues. Some questioned the letter's veracity.

Chaput also is offering his space in the archdiocesan newspaper to young people leading up to the synod. The most recent column, by 26-year-old Stefan Johnson, called upon church leaders to focus on "a clear affirmation of the teachings of the Church."

The synod should "listen carefully to the voices of young people," Johnson wrote. "But it also needs to turn away from ambiguity," caused by "widespread misunderstanding of Catholic belief and practice."

"For example, priests routinely provide guidance to their parishioners in a pastoral manner by being sensitive to their situational details on the ground," he wrote. "But pastoral sensitivity can easily — and sometimes deliberately — be misconstrued as divergence from Church teaching."

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This story appears in the **Synod on the Youth 2018** feature series. View the full series.
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