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Carol Glatz

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Young people can discover Jesus and find guidance more easily in small faith-based communities and networks, several observers said at the Synod of Bishops Oct. 10.

Enzo Bianchi, founder of the Bose ecumenical community, told the synod that when young people learn about Jesus, they are "fascinated and touched" by his life and how "he chose love, closeness, relationships that never excluded and caring for the other, most of all, for those in need."

Jesus becomes not just a "good example," but an actual source of inspiration who reveals it is possible to conform one's own life to the beautiful life he led, he said. What makes it beautiful and "meaningful" for youth, he said, was Jesus' relationship with nature and how he lived in a community with "a network of affection."

Youth, therefore, are looking for a relationship "with Jesus through the faith and witness of the evangelizer," not "an encounter with a doctrine, much less with a great idea or with a morality, but with the living reality that fascinates, that carries meaning and the promise of a full life," Bianchi said.

Fr. Jules Boutros, who heads the youth ministry committee of the Syriac Catholic Patriarchate in Lebanon, told the synod that if he were to paint a picture of the situation of young people in the Middle East, he would paint beautiful, colorful flowers growing in a minefield surrounded by rocks and brambles.

War and conflict have destroyed families, parishes and whole dioceses, which has forced young people "to go beyond parish walls" in search of fulfillment in the arts, sports, social media, human rights advocacy, volunteer work, movements and small faith communities.

Because the church needs to meet youth where they are, Boutros proposed investing in people who can reach out to and serve beyond the confines of the parish and meet young people where they are.

Serving as a delegate of the International Union of Superior Generals, Salesian Sr. Lucy Muthoni Nderi told the synod that normally the family teaches young people about love, commitment and discerning the best choices in life.

However, often this does not happen in Kenya, where she works, as many families there are affected by social and economic exclusion, exploitation and indifference. The sister is a pastoral worker for troubled or homeless children and youth in foster care.

"While the youth at risk appreciate the fact that the church in Kenya welcomes them in charitable institutions, they are also asking us to accompany their vulnerable families" and help them unleash the "caring potential" that is there but is "blocked by the inadequate system" in Kenya and by people's wounded lives.

The church should help young people before they end up on the streets or in institutions by helping their families, Nderi said. They must help build "small fraternal neighborhoods" where youth learn to be "co-creators of caring and fraternal local communities" that ensure people are safe, nurtured and accompanied, she added.

Vincent Paul Nneji, a young adult representing a Catholic youth organization in Nigeria, told the synod that being young in his home country "is one of the most difficult and, for some, a scary phase of life."

The family should play a major role in forming young consciences, he said, but everyone is struggling just to survive and that has meant discerning a vocation "has become less important or a thing of chance."

He also warned the church against taking advantage of young Catholic volunteers, who serve the church with joy, but sometimes feel they are not really part of the church, but are being "used" since "many of us have little or no means of livelihood and we have little or no choice other than to 'depend on the scraps that fall from the master's table.' "

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"We have talents, but there is little or no platform to express (them) even as church volunteers," Nneji said.

Matteo Severgnini, who is a member of the Communion and Liberation movement and runs a high school in Kampala, Uganda, told the synod it is impossible to warn youth against every danger and risk they may face in life.

Young people need an education for their "hearts" so that they can recognize what is true, good and beautiful, and what will lead them to a full life, not being fooled by false idols, he said.

Adults need to have the loving, trusting and reassuring attitude and approach parents have when their young toddler learns to walk and falls.

Young people will "fall" in life by making mistakes, he said, and they need adults who are "open to listening and dialogue, ready to welcome them and therefore are not frightened" by their errors. This attitude of "be not afraid" helps youth get back up, walk and hope again, he said.

Chinese Sr. Chaoying Cheng, who is studying theology at the Mater Ecclesiae Missionary College near Rome, told the synod that older people should approach the young "with an open and magnanimous heart" and help them with discernment.

Elders can influence young people with their love, good works and prayers, urging them to "not be afraid" because Jesus will always be with them, too, she said.

Speaking to older participants, she said, "I beg you not to make decisions for young people; don't mold them according to your models and don't do everything for them. Believe in young people" and help them be who God wants them to be, she said.

Joseph Cao Huu Minh Tri, a young Vietnamese worker who is part of Saigon's Catholic Youth Ministry, told the synod that young people need help interpreting the things they are passionate about in the light of faith so they know if it is "appropriate for us or not."

He called for "practical and helpful guidelines for accompanying young people in the process of vocational discernment, particularly to realize and live with the true passion in daily life," that is, in a way inspired by Christ's passion.

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