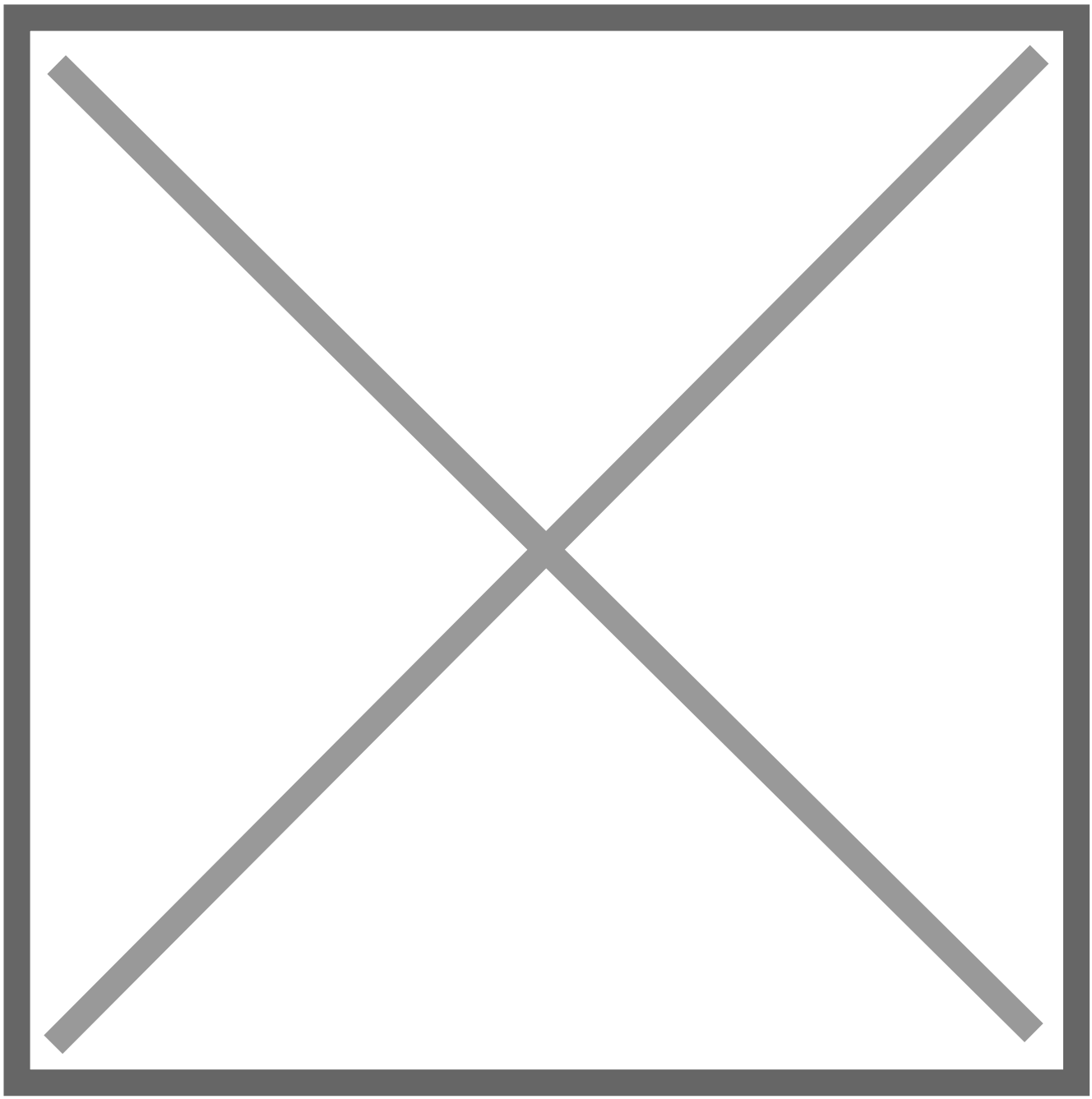
Vatican



Pope Francis greets a youth delegate in 2018 before a session of the Synod of Bishops on young people, the faith and vocational discernment at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Vatican City — September 8, 2020

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Young Catholics are giving the church a valuable lesson in the real meaning of "synodality," Pope Francis wrote.

"They have asked us in a thousand ways to walk alongside them — not behind them or ahead of them, but at their side. Not over them or under them, but on their level," he wrote in the introduction to a new Italian book of essays about youth ministry.

Salesian Fr. Rossano Sala, one of the special secretaries of the 2018 Synod of Bishops on young people, wrote the book, "Around the Living Fire of the Synod: Educating for the Good Life of the Gospel."

"Discernment" was one of the key topics at the synod and in "Christus Vivit," Francis' 2019 post-synod apostolic exhortation.

In Sala's book, Francis wrote that he is not trying "to transform every member of the people of God into a Jesuit," the order that has specialized in teaching spiritual discernment or prayerfully reading the signs of the times and seeking to know how God wants individuals and the church to respond.

Some people, he said, think "the pressing call to discernment is a fad of this pontificate and it is destined to pass quickly," but Francis insisted the spiritual practice is essential today when things are changing quickly, many people are struggling and so many need to hear the Gospel.

Listening and dialogue are the key first steps, the pope wrote. "It is more necessary than ever today to enter into an honest listening to the joys and struggles of every member of the people of God, and especially of every young person."

"The church as a whole still has a lot of work to do" in learning to listen, he said, "because too often, instead of being 'experts in humanity,' we end up being considered rigid and incapable of listening."

But the Gospel shows that listening was the first attitude of Jesus, he said, and it should be one's first response to encountering another person made in God's image and loved by God.

Dialogue is the natural second step, he said. "It is born from the conviction that in the other, the one who is before us, there are always the resources of nature and grace."

"Dialogue is the style that exalts the generosity of God because it recognizes his presence in everything and, therefore, one must find him in every person and be courageous enough to let him speak," the pope wrote.

The digital revolution, the climate crisis, migration and "the plague of abuse" already signaled to the church that many things must change, Francis wrote. Then the COVID-19 pandemic arrived, "transforming everyone's existence and we don't know where it will lead."

One thing is certain, he said: leaders and members of the church must engage in "discernment to guarantee closeness to the people of God, to reform the economy and finance, to devise new forms of solidarity and service."

Without studying the reality and considering it in prayer, the pope said, the response risks being just "the latest fashion, or we hide in past practices incapable of tapping into the unique situation of people and young adults today."

Francis said the choice to focus on "synodality" at the next general assembly of the Synod of Bishops, in 2022, is a natural outcome of the synod on young people.

There is an "urgent need to rediscover the baptismal grace" of all Catholics and their call to be "missionary disciples," he said. Embracing "synodality" with all members of the church "walking together," sharing input while respecting the roles proper to each member, is one way to acknowledge that grace and respond more effectively.

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