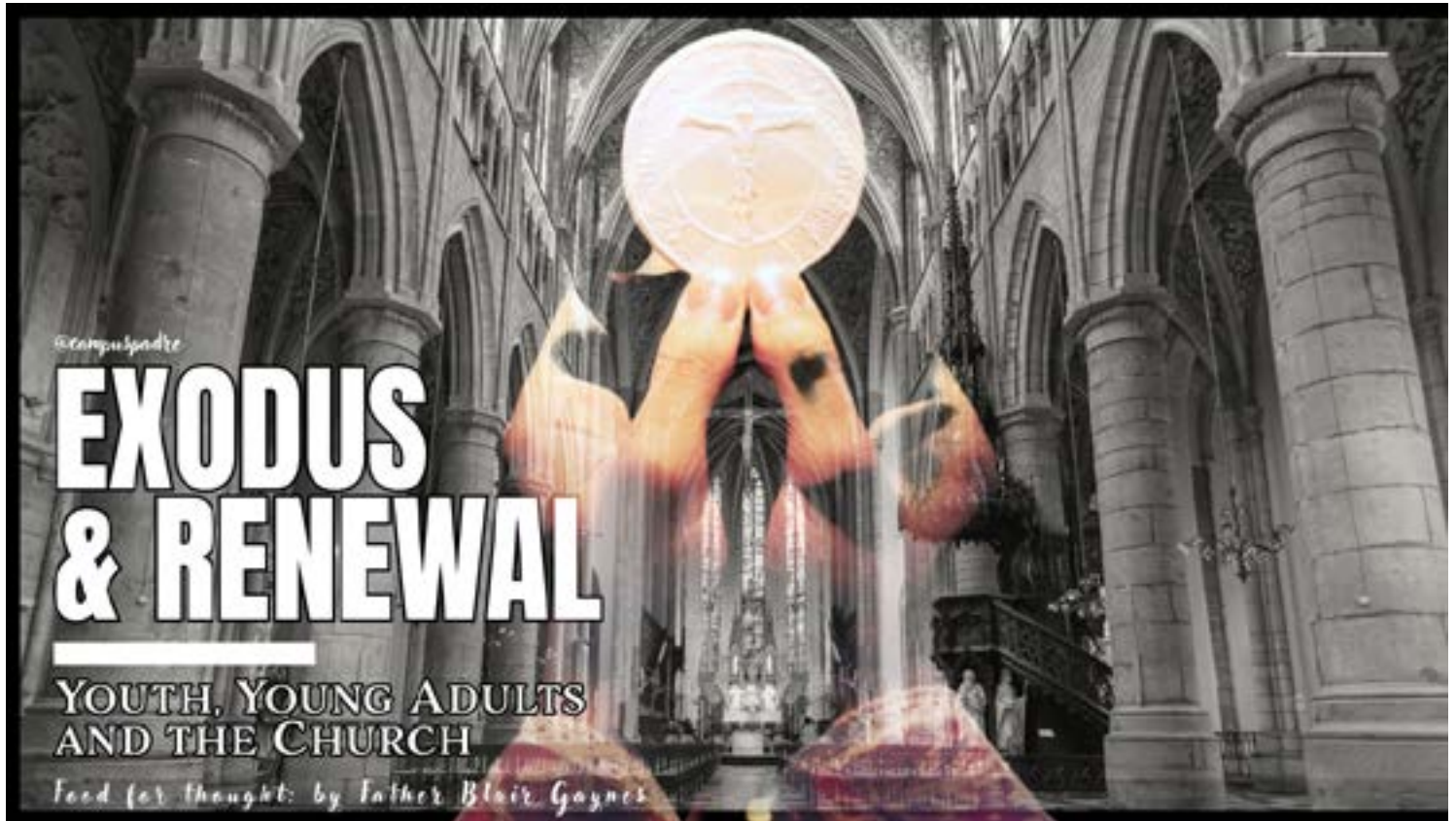


# EUCCHARIST

body, blood, soul & divinity



There are numerous and seemingly endless studies about the spiritual journeys of youth and young adults. Of course, they can be a source of valuable information. However, these are often studies that are permeated with commentary of a depressive negativity that the youth, like the Hebrews leaving Egypt, can't leave the Church fast enough.

The studies can dishearten, but if read without a firm disposition of trust in God and without a broader understanding of the history of the Church as well as western culture as it has shifted over the past 50 years in particular and the past 300 – 500 years in general, they can be experienced as downright depressing. If the prism through which you see the future of the Church and therefore the world is that 'youth are the future of the church', and if you uncritically completely accept what 'studies show', then you would be easily led astray and become convinced that 'the gates of hell' will in fact prevail against the Church, contrary to the words of our Savior!

# Exodus & Renewal

## *Youth, Young Adults & the Church*

*A reflection by* Father Blair Gaynes

From a business perspective, if we are to take on its face the loss of 80% of youth, then, considering the amounts of money that have been spent on the development of professional youth ministry, ministry programs and ministry personnel since the 1970's, then we must be honest and admit that we have clearly failed and terribly so, at understanding evangelization, education and formation as well as monumentally failed at achieving the goals of all those efforts and apparently wasted financial resources. The particular failure of note, albeit hidden until now for most, is that 'the church' failed to see that beneath the flow of myriad social changes, especially among youth, there was a radical reorientation of self-understanding, or more accurately, of understanding the nature of the self. The signs in the river flow were noted, logged, analyzed, and discussed but no one was considering how it was all affecting the riverbed, the foundations. So, none of our collective musings changed our premise that God as traditionally understood was still the ultimate authority in their hearts and minds.

However, the sad truth is that among youth and young adults within, leaving, and outside the Church, there exists the functional belief that they are their own ultimate authority.

"This means that as long as the Bible makes sense to what they already want and believe, they will happily agree, but when the Bible disagrees, they can apathetically shrug off the consequences of rejecting the message of the Bible." God, in the malleable minds of youth, becomes just one choice to pick from among many, not the authority which demands our whole lives.

This is why, I'm sure, our ministerial focus on emotive encounter with Christ, results most often in shallow roots. Although many youths and young adults might have been deeply moved and appear to agree with us about God, faith, worship, and practice they often have no interiorly transformative response to the radical message. In the church we have focused far too narrowly on the 'glory story' of a 'saved soul'

### **[Engaging Youth](#)**

***In the United States, "youth" are defined as those young people ages 12-18 in junior high school and high school. They are also known as "adolescents" or "teens." Youth are emerging leaders and protagonists in the Church and within their communities, schools, and society at large.***

### **[USCCB National Pastoral Framework for Ministries with Youth and Young Adults](#)**

***The Catholic bishops of the United States are currently developing a National Pastoral Framework for Ministries with Youth and Young Adults, which will serve as the U.S. response to Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation, "Christus Vivit," and to cast a renewed vision for the local implementation in parishes, campuses, dioceses, eparchies, movements, and new communities.***

without ongoing real accompaniment which makes more possible the 'falling away' or 'backsliding' of the young person for whom the experience never moved from emotional encounter to truth that is intrinsic to them as persons. The 'truth' they accepted only remains the 'truth' as long as the emotions remain satisfying and the communal experience is 'good for me', or until that youth is emotionally moved by another experience in an alternative community, or worse yet, emotionally wounded by 'the church'.

I would argue that the pews have been long filled with people who are there to express their own identity and fulfill their own desires, sitting beside others who would not allow themselves to see, hear, understand, and believe the reasonable evidence of faith set before them. The Church has been content with people who do all the right things, become leaders among us but for whom the experience was never more than part of a personal psycho-social-spiritual program by which they are defining and giving expression to their identities. It seems that many of us in ministry and among the lay faithful are far too eager to deny the above failures while at the same time continue to brainstorm, seeking resolutions to the described exodus that assume the failures are real.



There are also elements of truth in their faith and life experience that gives rise to feeling the need to leave in order to affirm the greater effects of the various forms of secular indoctrination which increasingly inform them about their 'authentic' selves and developing world view which must necessarily be devoid of any sacred foundations. We can't ignore the truth that there are too many youth and young adults in the United States for whom active faith, as we traditionally understand it, is increasingly seen as irrelevant to their life experience and for which there is no longer a role in defining their world view. It is also true that far too frequently parents, ministry leaders, priests, and bishops, are inappropriately willing to 'burn down the house' to rebuild one that will make everyone comfortable. There are too many faith leaders who suffer from unconsidered opinions and rash reactions to the studies, and who ready the bows and shoot the red-hot sharp arrows of blame at the institutional Church in affirmation of every so-called reason given for leaving. Such a response is ill advised and is indicative of the approach that various 'sister churches' have been taking for years, without achieving their desired goal of reengagement of youth and young adults. In fact, they are worse off now than ever before.

Yet, in the endless stream of studies done and the myriad reasons given for leaving, there is always something missing that underly the origins of these reasons. What seems to lack among those who are rejecting the radical and transformative nature of the Gospel, is personal responsibility for their faith and for understanding the actual teachings of Scripture and Tradition. This is very much related to the above discussed major failure. Increasingly, no matter the reason given, it seems those who leave don't desire a faith, a liturgy, a world view, an understanding of the human person that calls them to be formed within and transformed by divine life in Christ, but rather they desire a safe space of comfort and affirmation where

## What is

### "Ministry with Young Adults"?

In the model of Christ, the Good Shepherd, this is the Church's pastoral care and accompaniment of men and women in their late teens, twenties, and thirties through community, evangelization and catechesis, prayer and spirituality, leadership development, and engagement in the social mission of the Gospel.

"The Church can offer young adults a vision of life based on faith that calls each of them to holiness, community, and service" (Sons and Daughters of the Light). "In this way, by learning from one another, we can better reflect that wonderful multifaceted reality that Christ's Church is meant to be." *Christus Vivit*

### USCCB National Pastoral Framework for Ministries with Youth and Young Adults

The Catholic bishops of the United States are currently developing a National Pastoral Framework for Ministries with Youth and Young Adults, which will serve as the U.S. response to Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation, "Christus Vivit," and to cast a renewed vision for the local implementation in parishes, campuses, dioceses, eparchies, movements, and new communities.

they can celebrate a god of their own making, in a manner of their own choosing. And, there is an expectation that the Church is obligated by their understanding of unconditional love, to affirm them allow them to express their authentic selves.

This is an underlying desire to remake the Church into a mass marketable consumer commodity that is responsive and flexible to the needs and desires of individuals as individuals. It becomes a church that is everything to everyone and nothing of real consequence to anyone. It becomes a church that is inclusive, tolerant, or better yet blindly affirming, and responsive to a fault. But it must be said that Christ is not now, nor was he ever – all things to all people. The Church can never be what Christ is not. We are made members of the [Mystical Body of Christ, the Church](#) through baptism, and though we come as we are, we are then to be transformed. The Church, neither in its divine nor its human aspects, is transformed by us, that is to say - recreated in our image and likeness. We can never lose sight of the truth at the heart of it all: God created, man rejected Gods creation, God saves. The choice before us is as it always was, God's way or mine. These absolute truths of God are non-negotiable. Yes, we must reach out, but we must also remember Jesus did not chase after the rich young man. Jesus did not change the mission to satisfy the expectations of Judas Iscariot, the Pharisees, Peter, the folks who were shocked and angered when he flipped their tables and chased them out of the Temple, or, and most importantly, when he clearly proclaimed the truth in the 'Bread of Life' discourses and many turned away in disbelief.

I believe the truth of our situation and its resolution is to be found in the reality of the human condition and the consequences of the sins that flow from that condition. By this I mean, in many ways we have indeed failed and for the same reasons our continuing efforts to 'solve the problem' will fail again. Especially in the last decade and even more so in the coming decades, all of us – youth, young adults, parents, clergy - we must choose to be conformed to God through fruitful relationship with God, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We must avoid so called solutions that would try to bend the Church to popular

## U.S. Bishops' Prayer for Young Adults

Gracious and Loving God, Help these young men and women to be a light for all the world to see, in all the places they live and work. Let their light shine for all peoples: for their families, for their church communities, for their cultures and societies, for the economic and political systems, for the whole world. Coming into the room where the disciples were gathered after the resurrection, "Jesus, your son, said: Peace be with you!" (Jn 20:21). Make these men and women bearers of Christ's peace. "Blessed are the peacemakers, Teach them the meaning of what was said on the mountain: for they shall be called sons and daughters of God" (cf. Mt 5:9). Send them, Father, as you sent your son: to free their brothers and sisters from fear and sin.

**We ask this of you, in Christ's name. Amen.**

*Adapted from the Papal Homily for WYD 1995, Manila*

shallow currents of apparent worldly wisdom. We need the Holy Spirit to guide and help us to appropriately understand the root causes of rejection of the faith and the teachings of the Church, and to utilize new ways of sharing the unchanging Good News of Jesus Christ. We must discern and choose the good, the true and the beautiful revealed by the Holy Spirit and avoid insisting on answers that pander to the uncritically evaluated reasons given for leaving and remaining unwilling to challenge all the faithful to recognize and accept personal responsibility for their faith – knowing it, living it, and sharing it.

Though we can admit our failures and certainly despite the increasingly difficult cultural context, we cannot deny that in these past 60 years we have also become much more of a missionary church. This is certainly a work of God and a direct result of the work of the Council Fathers and their cooperators, as well as the specific leadership of the Popes since the Second Vatican Council. By the grace of God and work of the Holy Spirit many young people became authentic disciples of Christ, and they became parents who knew why relationship with Christ is essential to their

identity and therefore continuously developed a vibrant faith throughout their life. We must celebrate what God has accomplished and affirm our trust in the Lord. We must open our eyes to what the Lord has been doing and is in fact doing right now in the hearts of, not only young people but also middle aged and older folks – throughout the world! It is not, as many would have us believe, a dismal future that awaits.

## Christus Vivit: Pope Francis on Young Adults

Through his landmark apostolic exhortation, *Christus Vivit*, Pope Francis has given the Church a foundational text that now illuminates the Church's ongoing ministry with young adults. *Christus Vivit* (Latin for "Christ is alive!") was the Holy Father's pastoral response and contribution to a global Synod process that took place from 2016 through 2019.

This Synod, under the theme of "Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment," sought to provide a Catholic response to the realities of youth and young adults in connection to Jesus Christ, the community of the Church, and each person's vocational calling. The synodal journey included a worldwide consultation on the topic, continuing to a Pre-Synod Meeting of young adults in March 2018 in Rome and the Synod of Bishops in Rome in October 2018, and onto and beyond the release of *Christus Vivit*, written "to young people and to the entire people of God," in March 2019.

*Father Blair Gaynes @campuspadre, is a priest of the Diocese of St. Augustine Florida.*

*Fr. Blair has been serving in the diocese since 2008 and was ordained a Priest for the Diocese of St. Augustine at Christmas 2012 by Bishop Estevez. From 2011-2023 Fr. Blair served as the founding chaplain / director of Catholic Campus Ministries in the Duval County and surrounding area. During that time he also served as parochial vicar at Blessed Trinity Parish Jax and Resurrection Parish Jax. In 2017, in addition to Campus Ministry, he was appointed as the Pastor of the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in Jacksonville. Fr. Blair has over 35 years experience in youth and young adult work in social services, education, parish and campus ministry fields. As well as extensive experience as a spiritual director, retreat master. As of July '23, Fr. Blair is the pastor of St. Augustine Catholic Church and Director of the Student Center, at*

@campuspadre

