

With Jesus In the Peripheries

The vision of Maltese Youth Leaders

One feels that he/she is in the periphery when they are not loved or feel they are unwanted.

Young people here in Malta may find themselves in the periphery. They are people who as a result of their personal story and struggles feel that they are at the margins of our communities. Furthermore, they could also be individuals who are close to us, who might feel on the fringes of our communities or want to be part of the Church but feel that they don't belong there.

When God asks us to love others and we do not understand why and how we could do this, we are in the peripheries ourselves. It is uncomfortable and messy but this is exactly where Jesus is. Jesus Himself was in the periphery and like Him we are called to love.

We feel that some young people might be excluded from our groups and communities because of their character and background. They could also be feeling this distance because of their adolescent stage, sometimes this ends in isolation for the person. In addition some youths after confirmation distance themselves because they are in a particular moment of their growth.

In addition to this, bad leadership can be the cause of new peripheries and a lack of direction in young people. Staying within our safe zones as leaders and not reaching out to the new or the lonely members may lead them to this sense of loneliness.

To go to the peripheries, we need to trust Jesus, who is calling us to give us the strength we need to go out of our comfort zones. We can start by observing the reality around us, treating people with kindness, empathy and appreciating them for who they are.

However, many of us feel that we have little formation or motivation and feel alone when facing difficult situations. Being shy and insecure may also hinder us from accompanying young people. Today's world is all about instant gratification however

building a relationship with God takes time, and thus walking with young people on this journey will also take it's time.

To reach these young people, sometimes it is as simple as building a personal relationship with them, one built on trust, authenticity, empathy and sensitivity. We need to learn how to use their language, culture and create an atmosphere through music or other mediums where they can be themselves.

Youth groups in Malta are offering several opportunities to grow in faith. To appeal to young people on the periphery, leaders organise social activities such as team-building games, BBQs, sports, meals, and activity camps. As their role-models, leaders facilitate the introduction of core and formative values to youth such as respect, fellowship, belonging, accountability, openness to diversity, self-expression, and a sense of responsibility and ownership. The values and people encountered through such activities in turn lead the youth to delve into religious and spiritual matters. These are then addressed through adoration and worship, formation, spiritual direction, (preferably) regular prayer group meetings, discussion and sharing groups, theme or time-specific live-ins and retreats, outreaches, evangelisation, promoting awareness on controversial topics, and a deepening on the word of God. Thus, youth groups are often being used to offer a safe space where young people can question, discuss and be challenged for their personal, interpersonal, intellectual and spiritual growth.

Do young people know the Church's vision, or are they simply blind followers? If youths keep attending, clearly, they are looking for something which they might find within the community, through meaningful conversations with individuals who are ready to lend an ear. It is becoming increasingly evident that youths are more open to learn and listen within a smaller and non-judgemental environment. Yet, several groups still face a great challenge in appealing to youths in attending and maintaining a commitment. The age group following Confirmation is particularly hard to reach. The questions being asked by youths from this age group onwards reveal that the catechism offered is not being effective, especially a catechism that is bound by a sterile syllabus. The rapidly changing society in which we live requires of us a greater sensitivity to respond to the needs, reality and language of our youth. Is it time to seriously question the format through which youths may encounter the Word of God? Young people cannot rely or even relate to a teaching or a method which is stuck in its old ways. Young people will not accept the excuse that "it has always worked this way". Young people see differently. A change in the Church's structure of thought is desperately needed.

Young people are inundated with images and information, especially through social media. Using popular channels to appeal to young people is therefore, not necessarily an effective means to do so since it can easily lose its value. The image of a religious person, for example, might immediately affect a youth's ability to connect and communicate with that person. One of the results of an image-laden culture is that youths are therefore more sceptical to what is being offered and hence give all that much more importance to what others think of them. This also creates a barrier in promoting the idea of community in an increasingly individualistic society, even though there is a thirst for it.

To promote the idea of community, all organisations require resources, human and not. We cannot allow a lack of resource to be the barrier to reach our youths. Organisations often look to public funding, and thus it is natural to question why there is no Church agency that provides the possibility of funding and accountability.* In the same way, better use of human resources such as the appointment of people specialised in administration work and logistics within the parish may relieve the parish priest from these duties to be able to focus on his pastoral mission more fully instead. In this way they will have time to reach those who are in the peripheries. Ultimately, the goal is to reach the Church's vision, and hence youth groups (and the Church itself) do not afford to get lost on fundraising activities!

The Church's vision is a universal one. One person, therefore, cannot do everything; everyone has his or her own mission to reach that common goal. In spite of the technological means available, it is felt that we are still not connected enough. Through an attitude of humility, it is possible to be open to learning from each other and sharing our resources, thus creating more opportunities to reach out to others. Yet, at times it is very hard to accept that we are part of a wider Church. Networking between leaders (through platforms like Plexus), youth groups, and leaders of the Church is important to feel part of the Universal Church. Through networking and a more unified formation, we finally start venturing out of our comfort zone.

As people involved in youth ministry we would like to have more opportunities to meet and work together. We require a space to share our dreams, difficulties, aspirations and be available for one another in this ministry. We need a network which is not only built on a professional basis, but also on a spiritual and pastoral level, to be accountable to one another and to share the burdens that we might be carrying. We need to leave our comfort zones and to let go of our old structures and start to work also outside church walls in order to meet those who find it difficult to approach us.

We desire to see the Church investing more in the formation of the laity and priests especially in the formation and training of youth leaders and ministers. Youth leaders and educators need to know that the Church is going to support them as they take the plunge and go out into the peripheries. We need guidance, protection, resources, and in some cases funding in order to reach those who need us most.

The Church needs to be more aware of the reality within which it is set. Many times we sense that some priests are not always very present and available for this ministry. Is the role of the priest primarily an administrative one, or is it more pastoral? We know that we need to see more priests accompanying us as we accompany young people. However we also need to continue to accompany and support those priests who are investing heavily in this ministry.

We wish to see is a Church that reads the signs of the times, a Church which wants to be humble and is willing to suffer in order to bring the Good News. Each and everyone of us in the Church has a mission and something to offer to the Church which is unique to the gifts that God has given us. These gifts are not for ourselves or just for our groups but they are for the greater good of all the Church. The Church is very rich in culture and tradition, but we need to instruct our youth in the real Traditions of the Catholic Faith. However to do this we require a pastoral vision from those who are leading us.

Young people will follow and relate to leaders who are authentic and mission driven. On the other hand, youth leaders and educators need to start by transforming themselves with a true encounter with Christ and His Church.

This ministry is dependent on the Holy Spirit. We need to continue (and in some cases learn how) to discern what God is asking of us and our groups and communities. We also need to discern what God is calling us to on a national level and the places we must invest in, in order to follow where the Holy Spirit already is. This discernment will allow us to see in some way the bigger picture of God's plan for our youth. In cases where youth leaders and educators do not know how to discern, we ask of the Church, that she accompanies us in this process. This process is not a one time activity but will be an ongoing process as we serve in this ministry. We need to discern with patience but also active in waiting for the peace of Christ, to go out where Jesus already is, even if this will call us out of our comfort zones.

**During the presentation of this document, Archbishop Scicluna said that these resources are available but they might not have been communicated well to Church entities.. Mr Michael Pace Ross - Administrative Secretary of the Archdiocese of Malta - has informed MCYN that any requests for projects and funding are to be sent as a proposal to MCYN. Proposals will be seen to by MCYN and the Archdiocese on a case by case basis to see which funding program local or foreign the project can fall under. Submission of projects or request for funding should be made on youths@maltadiocese.org*