

THEOLOGICAL MODELS OF YOUTH IN *CHRISTUS VIVIT*

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Abstract

This piece carves its niche by focusing on the theological models of youth in the document *Christus Vivit*. This would include a study of the Scripture, the Old and New Testaments as already contained in the document, a study of the Christological model of youth, focusing on the relationships of the life of Christ with youthfulness, a mariological model, which deals with the relations of Mary, the Mother of Christ with youths, and lastly, the ecclesiological model of youth, which speaks of the relations between the Church and the youth. The purpose of this study is to provide a theological basis for further study of youth, and more importantly, to show in a theological way, the fundamental place that the youth occupy in the heart of Christ and His Church.

Keywords: Theology, Africa, *Christus Vivit*, Youth, Models, Christology, Mariology

Introduction

The exhortation *Christus vivit*, meaning, “Christ is alive” is a post-synodal apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis, written in response to the 15th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, on young people, faith and vocational discernment, held from 3 to 28 October 2018. It is addressed to young people and to the entire people of God. The Holy Father employed the concept “Christ is alive” to remind all of the fact that Christ brings hope to the young people of the world. The exhortation neatly divides into nine chapters and is addressed in a particular way to Christian young people. The document is dated 25 March 2019, the day on which Francis signed the original Spanish text while visiting the Basilica of the Holy House of Mary in Loreto, Italy, and published on 2 April, the anniversary of the death of Pope John Paul II, who was the first Roman Pontiff to address a letter to young people in 1985 and he was the Pope who began the World Youth Days.

These notwithstanding, this piece carves its niche by focusing on the theological models of youth in the document *Christus Vivit*. This would include a study of the Scripture, the Old and New Testaments as already contained in the document, a study of the Christological model of youth,

focusing on the relationships of the life of Christ with youthfulness, a mariological model, which deals with the relations of Mary, the Mother of Christ with youths, and lastly, the ecclesiological model of youth, which speaks of the relations between the Church and the youth. The purpose of this study is to provide a theological basis for further study of youth, and more importantly, to show in a theological way, the fundamental place that the youth occupy in the heart of Christ and His Church.

Biblical Model of Youth

The scriptural model of Youth would focus on the Old and New Testaments of the Scripture and their perspectives on youth.

The Old Testament

In the book of the beginnings of God's relationship with His peoples, Joseph, who was one of the youngest of his family (cf. *Gen 37:2-3*), was shown great things in dreams by God and when about twenty years old he outshone all his brothers in important affairs (cf. *Gen 37-47*). In the book of Judges, we have Gideon, in whom we see the frankness and inquisitiveness of young people, who are not used to sugar-coating reality. When told that the Lord was with him, he responded: "But if the Lord is with us, why then have all these things happened to us?" (*Jg 6:13*). God was not offended by that reproach, but went on to order him: "Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel!" (*Jg 6:14*)¹.

In the book of Samuel, Samuel was still a young boy, yet the Lord spoke to him. Thanks to the advice of an adult, he opened his heart to hear God's call: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (*1 Sam 3:9-10*). As a result, he became a great prophet who intervened at critical moments in the history of his country. King Saul was also young when the Lord called him to undertake his mission (cf. *1 Sam 9:2*). King David was chosen while still a boy. When the prophet Samuel was seeking the future king of Israel, a man offered as candidates his sons who were older and more experienced. Yet the prophet said that the chosen one was the young David, who was out tending the flock (cf. *1 Sam 16:6-13*), for "man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (v. 7). The glory of youth is in the heart, more than in physical strength or the impression given to others².

¹ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, March 2019, no. 7-8

² Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, March 2019, no. 9-10

When Solomon had to succeed David his father, felt lost and told God: "I am a mere youth, not knowing at all how to act" (1 Kg 3:7). Yet the audacity of youth moved him to ask God for wisdom and he devoted himself to his mission. Something similar happened to the prophet Jeremiah, called despite his youth to rouse his people. In his fear, he said: "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth" (Jer 1:6). But the Lord told him not to say that (cf. Jer 1:7), and added: "Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you" (Jer 1:8). The devotion of the prophet Jeremiah to his mission shows what can happen when the brashness of youth is joined to the power of God³.

We have the story of a Jewish servant girl of the foreign commander Naaman intervened with faith and helped him to be cured of his illness (cf. 2 Kg 5:2-6). The young Ruth was a model of generosity in remaining beside her mother-in-law who had fallen on hard times (cf. Ru 1:1-18), yet she also showed boldness in getting ahead in life (cf. Ru 4:1-17).

The New Testament

In the New Testament, Jesus related with young people and made several references to the young in His parables. One of Jesus' parables (cf. Lk 15:11-32) relates that a "younger" son wanted to leave his father's home for a distant land (cf. vv. 12-13). Yet his thoughts of independence turned into dissolution and excess (cf. v. 13), and he came to experience the bitterness of loneliness and poverty (cf. vv. 14-16). Nonetheless, he found the strength to make a new start (cf. vv. 17-19) and determined to get up and return home (cf. v. 20). Young hearts are naturally ready to change, to turn back, get up and learn from life. How could anyone fail to support that son in this new resolution? Yet his older brother already had a heart grown old; he let himself be possessed by greed, selfishness and envy (Lk 15:28-30). Jesus praises the young sinner who returned to the right path over the brother who considered himself faithful, yet lacked the spirit of love and mercy⁴.

In the Epistles of Saint Paul, God's word asks us to "cast out the old leaven that you may be fresh dough" (1 Cor 5:7). Saint Paul invites us to strip ourselves of the "old self" and to put on a "young" self (Col 3:9-10). In explaining what it means to put on that youthfulness "which is being renewed" (v. 10), he mentions "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness

³ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, March 2019, no. 11

⁴ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, March 2019, no. 13

and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving each other if anyone has a complaint against another” (*Col 3:12-13*). In a word, true youth means having a heart capable of loving, whereas everything that separates us from others makes the soul grow old. And so he concludes: “above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (*Col 3:14*)⁵.

Jesus had no use for adults who looked down on the young or lorded it over them. On the contrary, he insisted that “the greatest among you must become like the youngest” (*Lk 22:26*). For him age did not establish privileges, and being young did not imply lesser worth or dignity. In fact, the word of God says that young people should be treated “as brothers” (*1 Tim 5:1*), and warns parents not to “provoke your children, lest they become discouraged” (*Col 3:21*). Young people are not meant to become discouraged; they are meant to dream great things, to seek vast horizons, to aim higher, to take on the world, to accept challenges and to offer the best of themselves to the building of something better. That is why I constantly urge young people not to let themselves be robbed of hope; to each of them I repeat: “Let no one despise your youth” (*1 Tim 4:12*)⁶.

However, young people are also urged “to accept the authority of those who are older” (*1 Pet 5:5*). The Bible never ceases to insist that profound respect be shown to the elderly, since they have a wealth of experience; they have known success and failure, life’s joys and afflictions, its dreams and disappointments. In the silence of their heart, they have a store of experiences that can teach us not to make mistakes or be taken in by false promises. An ancient sage asks us to respect certain limits and to master our impulses: “Urge the younger men to be self-controlled” (*Tit 2.6*). It is unhelpful to buy into the cult of youth or foolishly to dismiss others simply because they are older or from another generation. Jesus tells us that the wise are able to bring forth from their store things both new and old (cf. *Mt 13:52*). A wise young person is open to the future, yet still capable of learning something from the experience of others⁷.

In the Gospel of Matthew we find a young man (cf. *19:20.22*) who approaches Jesus and asks if there is more that he can do (v. 20); in this, he

⁵ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, March 2019, no. 14

⁶ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, March 2019, no. 15

⁷ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, March 2019, no. 16

demonstrates that youthful openness of spirit which seeks new horizons and great challenges. Yet his spirit was not really that young, for he had already become attached to riches and comforts. He said he wanted something more, but when Jesus asked him to be generous and distribute his goods, he realized that he could not let go of everything he had. In the end, "hearing these words, the young man went away sad" (v. 22). He had given up his youth. In the Gospel also speaks about a group of wise young women, who were ready and waiting, while others were distracted and slumbering (cf. *Mt* 25:1-13). We can, in fact, spend our youth being distracted, skimming the surface of life, half-asleep, incapable of cultivating meaningful relationships or experiencing the deeper things in life. In this way, we can store up a paltry and unsubstantial future. Or we can spend our youth aspiring to beautiful and great things, and thus store up a future full of life and interior richness⁸. If you have lost your inner vitality, your dreams, your enthusiasm, your optimism and your generosity, Jesus stands before you as once he stood before the dead son of the widow, and with all the power of his resurrection he urges you: "Young man, I say to you, arise!" (*Lk* 7:14)⁹.

Christological Model of Youth

In the Christological model of youth, the scripture would be studied to see where the idea of youth relates to the person, nature and role of Christ. On the Cross of Calvary, Jesus "gave up his spirit" (cf. *Mt* 27:50) when he was little more than thirty years of age (cf. *Lk* 3:23). It is important to realize that Jesus was a young person. He gave his life when he was, in today's terms, a young adult. He began his public mission in the prime of life, and thus "a light dawned" (*Mt* 4:16) that would shine most brightly when he gave his life to the very end. That ending was not something that simply happened; rather, his entire youth, at every moment, was a precious preparation for it. "Everything in Jesus's life was a sign of his mystery"¹⁰; indeed, "Christ's whole life is a mystery of redemption"¹¹.

The Gospel tells us nothing of Jesus' childhood, but it does recount several events of his adolescence and youth. Matthew situates the time of the Lord's youth between two events: his family's return to Nazareth after their exile,

⁸ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, March 2019, no. 18-19

⁹ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, March 2019, no. 20

¹⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 515

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 517

and Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, the beginning of his public ministry. The last images we have of Jesus as a child are those of a tiny refugee in Egypt (cf. *Mt* 2:14-15) and repatriated in Nazareth (cf. *Mt* 2:19-23). Our first image of Jesus as a young adult shows him standing among the crowds on the banks of the Jordan river to be baptized by his kinsman John the Baptist, just like any other member of his people (cf. *Mt* 3:13-17).

The Gospel says that at his baptism the Father rejoiced and was well pleased: "You are my beloved Son" (*Lk* 3:22). Jesus immediately appeared filled with the Holy Spirit, and was led by the Spirit into the desert. There he prepared to go forth to preach and to work miracles, to bring freedom and healing (cf. *Lk* 4:1-14). Every young person who feels called to a mission in this world is invited to hear the Father speaking those same words within his or her heart: "You are my beloved child"¹².

Between these two accounts, we find another, which shows Jesus as an adolescent, when he had returned with his parents to Nazareth, after being lost and found in the Temple (cf. *Lk* 2:41-51). There we read that "he was obedient to them" (cf. *Lk* 2:51); he did not disown his family. Luke then adds that Jesus "grew in wisdom, age and grace before God and men" (cf. *Lk* 2:52). In a word, this was a time of preparation, when Jesus grew in his relationship with the Father and with others. Saint John Paul II explained that he did not only grow physically, but that "there was also a spiritual growth in Jesus", because "the fullness of grace in Jesus was in proportion to his age: there was always a fullness, but a fullness which increased as he grew in age"¹³.

Taking from the Gospel, it can be said that Jesus, in the years of his youth, was "training", being prepared to carry out the Father's plan. His adolescence and his youth set him on the path to that sublime mission. In his adolescence and youth, Jesus' relationship with the Father was that of the beloved Son. Drawn to the Father, he grew up concerned for his affairs: "Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" (*Lk* 2:49). Still, it must not be thought that Jesus was a withdrawn adolescent or a self-absorbed youth. His relationships were those of a young person who shared fully in the life of his family and his people. He learned his father's trade and then replaced him as a carpenter. At one point in the Gospel he is called

¹² Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, March 2019, no.25

¹³ Catechesis (27 June 1990), 2-3: *Insegnamenti* 13, 1 (1990), 1680-1681.

“the carpenter’s son” (*Mt* 13:55) and another time simply “the carpenter” (*Mk* 6:3). This detail shows that he was just another young person of his town, who related normally to others. No one regarded him as unusual or set apart from others. For this very reason, once Jesus began to preach, people could not imagine where he got this wisdom: “Is this not Joseph’s son?” (*Lk* 4:22)¹⁴.

Jesus did not grow up in a narrow and stifling relationship with Mary and Joseph, but readily interacted with the wider family, the relatives of his parents and their friends. Hence we can understand why, when he returned from his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, his parents readily thought that, as a twelve-year-old boy (cf. *Lk* 2:42), he was wandering freely among the crowd, even though they did not see him for an entire day: “supposing him to be in the group of travellers, they went a day’s journey” (*Lk* 2:44). Surely, they assumed, Jesus was there, mingling with the others, joking with other young people, listening to the adults tell stories and sharing the joys and sorrows of the group. Indeed, the Greek word that Luke uses to describe the group – *synodía* – clearly evokes a larger “community on a journey” of which the Holy Family is a part. Thanks to the trust of his parents, Jesus can move freely and learn to journey with others¹⁵.

Ecclesiological Model of Youth

Pope Francis, relating the concept of youth to the church, describes youth as simply being more than a period of time; it is a state of mind. That is why an institution as ancient as the Church can experience renewal and a return to youth at different points in her age-old history. Indeed, at the most dramatic moments of her history, she feels called to return with all her heart to her first love. Recalling this truth, the Second Vatican Council noted that, “enriched by a long and living history, and advancing towards human perfection in time and the ultimate destinies of history and of life, the Church is the real youth of the world”. In her, it is always possible to encounter Christ “the companion and friend of youth”¹⁶.

The Church is young when she is herself, when she receives ever anew the strength born of God’s word, the Eucharist, and the daily presence of Christ

¹⁴ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, March 2019, no. 28

¹⁵ Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (19 March 2016), 182: AAS 108 (2016), 384.

¹⁶ SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, *Message to Young Men and Women* (8 December 1965): AAS 58 (1966), 18

and the power of his Spirit in our lives. The Church is young when she shows herself capable of constantly returning to her source. Young people can offer the Church the beauty of youth by renewing her ability to “rejoice with new beginnings, to give unreservedly of herself, to be renewed and to set out for ever greater accomplishments”¹⁷. The elderly of the church need to find ways of keeping close to the voices and concerns of young people. “Drawing together creates the conditions for the Church to become a place of dialogue and a witness to life-giving fraternity”¹⁸. We need to make more room for the voices of young people to be heard: “listening makes possible an exchange of gifts in a context of empathy... At the same time, it sets the conditions for a preaching of the Gospel that can touch the heart truly, decisively and fruitfully”¹⁹.

The heart of the Church is also full of young saints who devoted their lives to Christ, many of them even to dying a martyr’s death. They were precious reflections of the young Christ; their radiant witness encourages us and awakens us from our lethargy. “Through the holiness of the young, the Church can renew her spiritual ardour and her apostolic vigour. The balm of holiness generated by the good lives of so many young people can heal the wounds of the Church and of the world, bringing us back to that fullness of love to which we have always been called: young saints inspire us to return to our first love (cf. *Rev* 2:4)”²⁰. Some saints never reached adulthood, yet they showed us that there is another way to spend our youth. Let us recall at least some of them who, each in his or her own way, and at different periods of history, lived lives of holiness.

Saint Sebastian was a young captain of the Praetorian Guard. It is said that he spoke constantly of Christ and tried to convert his companions, to the point that he was ordered to renounce his faith. When he refused, he was flogged to death. Saint Francis of Assisi, while very young and full of great dreams, heard Jesus’ call to become poor like him and to rebuild the Church by his witness. Saint Joan of Arc was born in 1412. She was a young peasant

¹⁷ SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Message to Young Men and Women (8 December 1965): AAS 58 (1966), 18

¹⁸ SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Message to Young Men and Women (8 December 1965): AAS 58 (1966), 1

¹⁹ SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Message to Young Men and Women (8 December 1965): AAS 58 (1966), 8

²⁰ Prayer at the Conclusion of the Way of the Cross, XXXIV World Youth Day in Panama (26 January 2019): *L’Osservatore Romano*, 27 January 2019, 167.

girl who, despite her tender years, fought to defend France from invaders. Blessed Andrew Phû Yên was a young Vietnamese man of the seventeenth century. He was a catechist and assisted the missionaries. Saint Kateri Tekakwitha, a young native of North America, was persecuted for her faith and, to escape, walked over three hundred kilometres in the wilderness. Kateri consecrated herself to God and died saying: "Jesus, I love you!" Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus was born in 1873. At fifteen years of age, having overcome many difficulties, she succeeded in entering the Carmelite convent. Thérèse lived the little way of complete trust in the Lord's love and determined to fan with her prayers the fire of love burning in the heart of the Church. Blessed Ceferino Namuncurá was a young Argentinian, the son of the chief of a remote tribe of indigenous peoples. He became a Salesian seminarian, filled with the desire to return to his tribe, bringing Jesus Christ to them. Ceferino died in 1905. Other young saints include: Blessed Isidore Bakanja, Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati, Blessed Marcel Callo, Blessed Chiara Badano, etc²¹.

Mariological Model of Youth

In the heart of the Church, Mary shines forth. She is the supreme model for a youthful Church that seeks to follow Christ with enthusiasm and docility. While still very young, she accepted the message of the angel, yet she was not afraid to ask questions (cf. *Lk* 1:34). With open heart and soul, she replied, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord" (*Lk* 1:38).

We are always struck by the strength of the young Mary's 'yes', the strength in those words, 'be it done', that she spoke to the angel. This was no merely passive or resigned acceptance, or a faint 'yes', as if to say, 'Well, let's give it a try and see what happens'. Mary did not know the words, 'Let's see what happens'. She was determined; she knew what was at stake and she said 'yes' without thinking twice. Hers was the 'yes' of someone prepared to be committed, someone willing to take a risk, ready to stake everything she had, with no more security than the certainty of knowing that she was the bearer of a promise. So I ask each one of you: do you see yourselves as the bearers of a promise? What promise is present in my heart that I can take up? Mary's mission would undoubtedly be difficult, but the challenges that lay ahead were no reason to say 'no'. Things would get complicated, of course, but not in the same way as happens when cowardice paralyzes us because things are not clear or sure in advance. Mary did not take out an

²¹ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, March 2019, no.51-58

insurance policy! She took the risk, and for this reason she is strong, she is an 'influencer', the 'influencer' of God. Her 'yes and her desire to serve were stronger than any doubts or difficulties'²².

45. Without yielding to evasions or illusions, "she accompanied the suffering of her Son; she supported him by her gaze and protected him with her heart. She shared his suffering, yet was not overwhelmed by it. She was the woman of strength who uttered her 'yes', who supports and accompanies, protects and embraces. She is the great guardian of hope... From her, we learn how to say 'yes' to the stubborn endurance and creativity of those who, undaunted, are ever ready to start over again"²³.

Mary was a young woman whose heart overflowed with joy (cf. *Lk* 1:47), whose eyes, reflecting the light of the Holy Spirit, looked at life with faith and treasured all things in her youthful heart (cf. *Lk* 2:19.51). She was energetic, ready to set out immediately once she knew that her cousin needed her. She did not think about her own plans, but went "with haste" to the hill country (*Lk* 1:39). When her young son needed protection, Mary set out with Joseph to a distant land (cf. *Mt* 2:13-14). She also joined the disciples in awaiting the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (cf. *Acts* 1:14). In her presence, a young Church was born, as the apostles went forth to give birth to a new world (cf. *Acts* 2:4-11)²⁴.

Mary is the Mother who watches over us, her children, on our journey through life, often weary and in need, anxious that the light of hope not fail. For that is our desire: that the light of hope never fail. Mary our Mother looks to this pilgrim people: a youthful people whom she loves, and who seek her in the silence of their hearts amid all the noise, the chatter and the distractions of the journey. Under the gaze of our Mother, there is room only for the silence of hope. Thus Mary illumines anew our youth²⁵.

Conclusion

The Holy Father, Pope John Paul II had earlier observed that the youth are not only the present but above all the future of humanity. It is thus necessary to help young people to overcome the obstacles thwarting their development: illiteracy, idleness, hunger, drugs. In order to meet these

²² Address at the Vigil with Young People, XXXIV World Youth Day in Panama (26 January 2019): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 28-29 January 2019, 6.

²³ Prayer at the Conclusion of the Way of the Cross, XXXIV World Youth Day in Panama (26 January 2019): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 27 January 2019, 12.

²⁴ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, March 2019, no.46-47

²⁵ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, March 2019, no.48

challenges, young people themselves should be called upon to become the evangelizers of their peers. No one can do this better than they. He emphasized that the pastoral care of youth must clearly be a part of the overall pastoral plan of Dioceses and parishes, so that young people will be enabled to discover very early on the value of the gift of self, an essential means for the person to reach maturity²⁶. As part of the effort to help young people in their journey towards the discovery of the gift of self, the foregoing has studied the post apostolic synodal apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis with the purpose of developing theological models of youth. From the document, Biblical model, Christological Model, Mariological Model and Ecclesiological Model of youth were developed from the deep theological insight of the Roman Pontiff, Pope Francis. In relation to these theological models, it is hoped that the youth will develop a stronger value of the self and be strengthened in their commitment to Christ and His Church.

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Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, No. 93

²⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, No. 93