

Hoping with Young People

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It is clear that Fintan O'Toole sees the Catholic Church in terms of clericalism alone and accordingly has formed a very pessimistic view of the future ('Ireland is running out of priests', *Irish Times*, 13 May). A broader assessment, however, presents a more positive outlook, with the population of the Catholic Church worldwide now hitting over 1.4 billion. The Church's mission to proclaim the Gospel 'to the ends of the earth' remains as urgent as ever but the terrain is changing.

The synodal journey begun by Pope Francis and continued by Pope Leo has awakened a new spirit of co-responsibility, urging us to become a listening Church. Religious sisters, lay leaders, catechists, permanent deacons and everyday disciples quietly carry the Church forward in schools, hospitals, prisons and parishes, making way for new growth.

One of the most profound signs of hope is the deep and growing hunger for authenticity and meaning among young people. Across the world,

there are countless examples of youth-led faith movements, retreats, pilgrimages and volunteerism all revealing a desire to encounter God personally and live faith with sincerity.

While secular culture often promotes individualism and offers only consumption and performance in return, many young people are rediscovering the communal and transcendent aspects of the faith, offering witness through service, prayer and discipleship.

The message of the Catholic Church is that meaning is found not in isolation but in communion with God, with others and with creation. Through faith, belief and practice, young people are given the tools to ask not just 'What do I want to do?' but 'Who am I called to be?' A question for us all, perhaps?

Amid this consumer culture, and a growing sense of disconnection, Pope Francis emerged as a source of inspiration for our young people.

From the beginning of his papacy, what set him apart were the qualities he embodied: humility, compassion and a radical commitment to the marginalised and to the care of creation. These values resonated deeply with a generation increasingly concerned with social justice, inclusion and environmental sustainability.

Pope Francis signalled a new kind of leadership – one rooted in service, not power.

He showed that in the Church there is room for everyone, just the way we are. He did not want young people to become discouraged but to dream great things, to seek vast horizons, to take on the world, to accept challenges and to offer the best of them-

selves to the building of something better. He urged young people not to go through life anaesthetised or approach the world like tourists. He called on them to 'Make a ruckus!'

He promoted a culture of encounter, discernment and dialogue and became a global voice for care for the earth. In doing so, he connected deeply with young activists and environmentalists, many of whom may not identify as religious but still find profound meaning in his message.

He saw migration as a structural phenomenon and not as a passing emergency. He challenged our thinking on this and reminded us that the only time that we are allowed to look down upon others is when we are offering to help them up.

His view of education was not about knowing things or taking lessons but about being able to use three lingos, those of the head, the heart and the hands: learning so that you can think about what you feel and do, can feel what you think and do, and can do what you feel and think.

Pope Francis may not have provided all the answers, but he did invite young people into the deeper questions of life; questions about who we are, what we are called to do and how we might live in greater solidarity with each other and with the earth. In this invitation, many found not only inspiration but meaning. In *Christus Vivit*, he spoke directly to young people, reminding them that the Church needs their momentum, their intuitions and their faith. 'We need you', he said. 'And when you arrive where we have not yet reached, have the patience to wait for us.'