

**GIVE WINGS AND ROOTS TO YOUNG PEOPLE:
THE MESSAGE AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS 2018 FOR
AFRICA AND CONSECRATED LIFE**

*An exclusive Interview with Bishop John Akin OYEJOLA
(Catholic Diocese of Oshogbo, Nigeria, and a delegate of Catholic Bishops'
Conference of Nigeria at the Synod of Bishops 2018).*

The Catholic Voyage: *Good afternoon! Thank you for the opportunity for The Catholic Voyage to discuss with you about the Synod of Bishops on the Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment. We would like you to share with us your thoughts on this Synod and some aspects of its message, and help our readers to better understand it especially in relation to the young people and the Consecrated life in Nigeria and possibly Africa.*

Bishop John Oyejola: Thank you. It is my joy to share my views with you.

The Catholic Voyage: *What are your general impressions of the journey of this Synod of Bishops, which is now coming to its conclusion?*

Bishop John Oyejola: It has been an interesting, challenging, brain storming experience and it spurred lots of reflections. I am very positive and optimistic about it, because it is a way of building future Church. We focussed on exploring deeper and showing that the youths are grace, strength and blessing for the Church. We therefore must seek to deepen their faith and build their capacity to be credible witnesses and productive citizens.

The Catholic Voyage: *Shortly before the Synod began; we heard in the news media that some groups say their voices are not represented in the Synod. From your experience, knowing the happenings inside the Synod, as a matter of fact do you think the voices of the youth are being heard at the Synod?*

Bishop John Oyejola: Absolutely! It is not possible to consult every person. However, many groups of young people were consulted, and all the five continents were represented. Even the bishops were represented throughout the five continents. And we spoke for our continents. So, all our youths were brought in to the table and the young people made interventions; we discussed issues that are facing them today.

The Catholic Voyage: *As you listen to the other Synod Fathers and participants in the Synod, have there been some proposals in particular that have struck you concerning how the Church-as-Family of God can effectively transmit the Catholic faith to young Africans today?*

Bishop John Oyejola: Yes. Basically, we discussed more in depth the issues facing our young people. They are issues like the breakdown of marriage and family life, sexuality crises, the lack of jobs to do, the lack of good governance cascading into more complex issues such as compulsive migration, loss of hope and violence. These are issues that really affect young people.

The Catholic Voyage: *There have been many Synods of Bishops since Vatican Council II. What, if any, do you see as being unique about this particular Synod? Practically what is the relevance of this Synod to Nigeria and its young people?*

Bishop John Oyejola: What I see as unique about this Synod is the desire to go out and work, to put into practice our resolutions. We made some concrete proposals on what to be done. Part of it is that they expect dioceses to have youth centres, places where the youth can come together. They expect us to go back and see how we can start creating jobs in a little way for our young people, to make them committed and see how we can equip them into the faith, and help to strengthen and deepen their faith as well.

The Catholic Voyage: *Some young consecrated persons are also participating in the Synod. This is encouraging in the sense that the Church thus recognises the presence and role of young consecrated persons in society and church. They represent all young consecrated persons in Africa and the world. What do you consider the key message of this Synod to Consecrated Persons, at least in the present-day Nigeria?*

Bishop John Oyejola: One of the main issues raised about consecrated life is that those who are gaining admission into Institutes of Consecrated Life are members of the youth, they are young people. So, they should let them have the same mind that they are missionaries as well. Because they are very special to God's mind, they should see themselves in the image of Jesus when he was their own age. Jesus was already acting, bringing the Gospel to everyone. Young people, too, are challenged to behave like Jesus, not to look or focus at failures of those who are ahead of them but they must to look at Jesus as their ideal and live that life.

The Catholic Voyage: *One of the essential topics in the Synod's Working document is "discernment". Does theme appear as a key issue during the discussions at the Synod? If so, what in your view are the requirements and practical implications of discernment in the accompaniment of young people, including candidates in formation for Consecrated Life and Priesthood and in the diocesan pastoral ministry?*

Bishop John Oyejola: We talked about *discernment* not on its own alone, in abstract as it were, but in line with accompaniment, a journeying with. So, discernment is in two ways: you discern and I discern, and you tell me what you want to do. And I look at you, what is happening in your life, and help you to see things, assisting you to look at issues in this way or may be in other direction. So, we journey together, accompanying the individual. So, discernment is a process which you do, not just once but throughout the journey, as you journey together, in truth and mercy. That

can be done in the atmosphere of friendship, care, openness prayer, and so on. These are some of the things that were suggested.

The Catholic Voyage: *I am curious from the viewpoint of pastoral experience. You have been a priest for many years now and you are a young Bishop. Pastorally, is there something in particular that gives you hope for the future of the Church in Nigeria, particularly in relation to the young people in Nigerian dioceses?*

Bishop John Oyejola: This question is of personal interest to me. I have been a youth Coordinator for my diocese and when I came into the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, I was chosen as Episcopal Chaplain for the Youth in the country, and that is the reason why I am in this particular Synod. Yes, I am very optimistic about the future of the Church in Nigeria. In Nigeria, there are many dioceses that have their chaplain for Youth. Even the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria has an office for the youth. And there is a priest there coordinating the programs for the youth throughout the country. We have a kind of outlined programs, such as: the training of chaplains, the training of the president, secretary and treasurer of youth groups in all and each dioceses together, to empower them, to give them a sense of leadership. In many dioceses they are doing a lot of great things for the youth. Take Oshogbo for example, we are doing so much. Recently, because of the situation in the country, we have started a Catering Centre for young people. Almost all the first set got jobs instantly with pay above the minimum wage in Nigeria. The first set comprised of 32 people, the 2nd group had 47 people enrolled, and now we have 65 people doing the course. They are growing in number. The elite people in the region need persons to assist them. For example, families need person to take care of their children, or take care of the house for them. However, they need people who are trained. Not just trained, but trained from good centres, such as are the Catholic training centres. So, people appreciate that the Catholic training centres offer quality training and they are ready pay money for the services offered. Graduates from these centres, once employed, would have free housing as well, and they have one month salary free during their holiday period, making it thirteen months' salary in a year. So, it is a good package for them. If they are able to manage and save money very well, in no time they can start their own business as well. So, this is really helping young people. This idea is coming up also in the area of agriculture. Part of what we discussed at the Synod is: How can we get financial support for those who have plans so as to help them carry out such plans? For example, for such program, in the case of my diocese, I need tractors. One tractor will cost me about sixteen million Naira (which is about US\$40,000) in Nigeria. If I can get somebody who can get me two tractors, in five years time I would have produced more than forty young people who will be self-sustained, having their own farms. This has a ripple effect, because it's going to produce more food for the country, they are already self-employed and gradually the problem of unemployment, the lack of jobs, will reduce; there will be enough food for many regions of the country, and we shall have more peace.

The Catholic Voyage: *Let us talk about the Catholic Youth Organization of Nigeria (CYON), present in many dioceses. The Synod of Bishops is challenging to all countries of the world. But in Nigeria particularly, how will the Synod help to revamp, renew and reinvigorate the CYON such that it can produce creative and courageous initiatives, and be more practical and solution-oriented?*

Bishop John Oyejola: Young people in Nigeria are very vibrant and active. What we need to do more is for the Bishops to have more interest in it, by training more priests for that purpose. Right now, in Oshogbo diocese for example, we are training two priests. One of them is at the Salesian Pontifical University, Rome, and another is in Kenya, such that one is coming back next year and the other is spending another two years before returning. When they come back, they will be two priests fully assigned to that particular apostolate. They will know what to do because they are trained for that particular apostolate. You do not send just anybody for that such special apostolate; no, send someone who is already skilled in that apostolate, prepared for that mission. Because it is a serious mission. I will try to sell that kind of idea to other bishops: please train people for that area and bring them to that job. Even when they finish training, do not immediately take them away; rather, let them go and practice that apostolate, let them do work a long time in that field. But it is not enough to train people. They need resources, too. Youth apostolate is a kind of venture on which you have to spend money. In the long run, it will yield interest for the Church. This is very important.

The Catholic Voyage: *For nearly over fifty years or so the Church in Africa has been talking about money for its evangelizing mission, particularly in terms of ensuring her financial self-reliance and self-sustenance. African theologians and pastors have discussed it. Some had even proposed a moratorium of the Churches in Africa on the financial request and dependency on funds from abroad. Obviously, the urgent appeal for financial self-reliance -- which is understood to be complementary to Christian solidarity -- is in addition to the equally widespread felt need for cultural self-reliance and self-reliance in personnel. And you have just referred to this problem now: the need for money. Money influences people's way of thinking and their planning and execution of projects. Now, while it seems the Catholic Church in Africa has by-and-large obtained the self-reliance in personnel, the other serious questions remain. Where will the money for pastoral care of young people and for other apostolates come from? Concretely, what are the specific measures, and the strategic plans and policies of the Church in Nigeria, indeed in Africa, so that in the next 20-40 years, the Church in Nigeria would not still be in the situation we are today but rather, as a matter of fact, she will financially rely on and sustain herself and her evangelizing mission, at least for the most part?.*

Bishop John Oyejola: Attaining self-reliance for a local Church is determined mainly by the prosperity of the local people otherwise the Church would have stopped being a local church. It is they who would enrich the church. Our effort has been to improve the lot of our people. If we don't invest on them, we would eventually spend whatever we invest elsewhere on them except we are no longer the compassionate face of Christ. The kind of governance in Africa is not helping issues

at all. Many dioceses are trying their best. As said earlier, in my diocese we have gone into farming in order to attract and support the local people in farming. There is land everywhere. We train farmers free of charge to improve their yield and marketing skills. An interesting part of it is that when we train these young people, some money will come into the diocese. We are even thinking of the area of agricultural value chain. In this way the church can buy their produce at fair price to process or store in order to reduce the loss suffered by farmers from unfair middlemen. We continue to lobby the government to look into the unfair market situation for rural farmers through relevant policies and initiatives.

Also, we face a lot of challenges. We have to pay the school fees of some of the children, then also the hospital bills. We cannot close our eyes to some of these problems when the government is not doing its part. So, there are lot of areas or avenues through which the little money we have goes out. But many dioceses in Africa, particularly in Nigeria, are making efforts to be self-reliant and self-sustaining. Truly, it is not a good thing that we are always going out to beg for funds. Yes, this frequent practice does not give you, as Africans, dignity and sufficient freedom.

The Catholic Voyage: *In what concrete ways do you suggest Bishops and the Religious women and men can collaborate in the pastoral care of young people in the evangelization of Nigeria, since we all are co-responsible for it?*

Bishop John Oyejola: In this sphere of youth apostolate, I see that Priests and Bishops are men. If we can have more female religious who can collaborate in that area of apostolate, it will be better. When I was a chaplain the young ladies will come and talk to me about things that have to do with women. I had to say, "Come and talk to the Rev. Sister here". It is only on one-on-one, because the Rev. Sister is easy for me to approach. But if a Sister is not there, and the young girls need help, it may become difficult to accompany. This is one of the areas of ministry where collaboration is necessary. The Religious Superiors could allow the Sister to work in the diocese in the youth ministry. The Religious Institute can either train them and allow them to work in that apostolate in the diocese; or the bishop trains them and give the trained Sister a sufficient time to do the apostolate in the diocese. It is not just nor proper that the Bishop trains a Sister, and then immediately after her Superiors come to say they need her for other place or/and apostolate. So, if the Bishop trains a person, her Institute should give the person the opportunity and time to actualize the goal, the purpose of the training and see the result for which the person was trained. No doubt, there are many other areas of apostolate where Bishops and the Religious can and should work together in the diocese. It is not enough to be praying. Prayer is very important and necessary. But prayer without work is dead.

The Catholic Voyage: *Most of us know the story of the young African St. Augustine and his conversion. But, today, it may be asked: Who are other models, if any, of holy life that we can present to the young people in the Africa?*

Bishop John Oyejola: Of course, there are people whom we can present to young people in the area of holiness and sainthood. The purpose of church naming saints is to challenge people, as she says: "Look, these people we are proclaiming saints were once human beings like you. He or she lived a holy life, following Christ. It is now your own turn to be likes that person". There are lot of people you see as ideal people: we have St. Kizito, St. Mother Theresa of Calcutta, St. John Paul II... In our own areas, too, in Africa, there are lot of people living among their parents and families. They know those who are living an exemplary, holy life. The children and young people see us; you can't hide from them. They know our sincerity. That is why many of them, when they see how sincere you are they open up themselves to you for help. They know there are lot of people who are making efforts every day to be holy. They are making effort in the right way and people know it. And these young people see them and they try to emulate them and model their life after them. So, you see them coming for prayers, for pilgrimages, for adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, and so on: it is because they are encouraged by other people's lives which are modelled after Jesus' life and the life of other saints, too.

The Catholic Voyage: *What is your dream, if you have one, for this Synod and for Nigeria? As a pastor, what do you envisage as the more important and outcome of this Synod of Bishops for the Africa?*

Bishop John Oyejola: Yes, I have a dream. As a pastor I dream always. My first dream is that I want to see the local church giving wings to our young people to fly, and giving them roots to be firm on ground. It simply means spurring them to have the confidence to explore life and the same time be firmly rooted in the faith to be resilient in the face of difficulties and be able to witness even unto death. That is, I will ground them in their faith, no matter what the challenges are, because we cannot live as Christians without challenges. It is normal to have a cross; everything has its own trademark. The only trademark of a Christian is the cross. When we have a challenge, that is our own cross. So, we have to encourage our young people to know that when they have challenges, they are not to run away from them; they are to face the challenges with the hope that they are going to overcome them. They must trust in Christ, because Christ is the Emmanuel: he is always with us, till the end of time. That is my dream.

The Catholic Voyage: *All the themes of the Synod are important for the universal Church. Though you may have hinted at it, one must ask: specifically, what issues raised at the Synod do you consider more relevant and urgent for the Church in Nigeria of our time?*

Bishop John Oyejola: I have mentioned some of them: attending to challenge of loss of hope issuing from break down in family life, poverty, war, violence,

immigration and environmental degradation. For instance many young people from Benin City, Nigeria, are a case in point. Recently some Rev. Sisters went to give a workshop to children and young people in Benin City concerning migration. Many of the girls are still saying, "Let us go and experience what others are experiencing abroad" Even when these girls are told that it is dangerous, very risky, they still wish to go out. And I read in the news yesterday that the Government officials are even doing home-to-home education, asking families not to let their children migrate abroad. In fact, when they migrate they are not prepared psychologically for it. They don't have the proper skills. When they get there, they are not going to get a job; so, what are they going to be doing there? Often, they become prostitute, and this go along with human trafficking. These are the major issues in Africa: attending to poverty; how to help us reduce war and violence, and then migration of our young people and thus they lose their faith, lose their cultures, and lose their lives as well.

The Catholic Voyage: *This year, 2018, we celebrate the golden Jubilee of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM). Africa is blessed with having a very large percentage of young people in the world and in the Church; the number is growing. In your view, in what ways can the Church-Family of God in Nigeria, including Consecrated Persons, concretely receive and advance the implementation of the Synod of Bishops on young people? Are there going to be strategic plans by the Bishops and their dioceses in this regard?*

Bishop John Oyejola: One issue we have in Africa is the language. We are already talking in that area. We see that the President of SECAM should try to call all, or at least the representatives of each country in Africa together, table this matter and let us have concrete plan. It should not just be a concrete plan: there should be a follow up to it, an evaluation of it after some years, to see: How far have we gone? What have we achieved? Where do we want to go? This is exactly what we have in mind.

The Catholic Voyage: *You highlighted the important and necessary issue of strategic planning and periodic evaluation by the SECAM after this Synod. At the same time, consider that, hopefully, very many people (even outside the Catholic Church) will read the final document and message of the Synod from different perspectives and contexts. As an African, what particular issues do you see that young people should be engaged with, and committed to? What do you consider to be their own roles, what should they expect from the Church? The diocesan Bishops will do something in favour of the youth, but what are the young people to do?*

Bishop John Oyejola: What we expect from the young people is to co-operate with the plan of the Church. Young people can dream very big. They want to become President of the nation in two or three years. Let them dream, but they should listen to experience of life, cooperate with the plan that the Church is already putting in place for young people. As I said earlier, I am happy that among those I trained as

a caterer one of them was a graduate. I was happy; he came to me to say thank you very much. I said to him, now with this your new certificate, if one certificate is not working, the other will work for you. In the same way, if some of the young people can humble themselves and be open to corrections and directions, I think they will do very well.

The Catholic Voyage: *in what practical and specific ways do you envisage and hope that the diocesan Bishops and the Religious Institutes can work in collaboration to facilitate and effectively advance the reception and implementation of the deliberations of this Synod the pastoral care of young people?*

Bishop John Oyejola: The first thing is for each diocese to have diocesan pastoral plan. The Pastoral plan is a roadmap developed together. In my diocese, all the Religious have a copy of the Pastoral Plan. They know where they have to come in; and after finishing that, we had a meeting with all the priests, and a meeting with all the Religious men and women. Everybody knows where they come in. That gives direction to all pastoral initiatives. But if there is no kind of specific pastoral plan, a road map, there will always be a problem. I think every diocese should have the Pastoral Plan, as a road map. In this way you do not start afresh every time. Our diocesan Plan lasts for five years. After five years, we will do evaluation, and then rewrite and update, considering: What have we done? What have we not done? What are the ways forward? We draw a new pastoral plan for another five years, If possible, we organize a Diocesan Synod where everybody participates for us to grow, and move forward.

The Catholic Voyage: *In the light of the interventions at the Synod of Bishops, what do you think are the possible implications and prospects of the Synod for (a) the formators in our Formation Houses and Seminaries, and (b) Vocations Directors?*

Bishop John Oyejola: Of course, the Synod dwelt on this issue. A particular view was pushing everything to the seminary and formation houses, it appears that there will be too many programs for the Seminary and they will not have enough time to carry out these programs. The formators themselves must be ready to take the work of formation as a real vocation. It is like Eli and Samuel. They are to *discern* with the young people; they are to journey with them. Not all of them will become priests or Brothers, or Sisters. But let them see that, yes, you are good person; however it is not in this place you are going to thrive or blossom. The candidates themselves must be ready, and be open; they have to be "friends" in the journey, not a kind of master-slave relationship, but friends, those who are working together, in accompaniment. This is very important. And we expect them to be well prepared; not everyone should enter the seminary. Those who have the aptitude, the skills, and the interest are to be considered. All this, of course, also applies to those who aspire to enter into Formation Houses of Religious institutes.

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The Vocations Director, too, has a responsibility. The Vocations Director should not have a particular interest in this or that person. There should be no God-fatherism there, and no tribalism. That is why we talk about accompaniment and discernment. Even if it is my brother who wants to enter the seminary or the Formation house but does not have the aptitude and other important requirements, I will have to tell him, "Brother, this is not your way. You will not be happy here. Everybody is looking for happiness".

The Catholic Voyage: *You made an intervention on Formation and empowerment of Catholic Youths in Africa. What did you tell the members of the Synod?*

Bishop John Oyejola: I have shared a part of what I said at the Synod during this conversation. Here is my intervention (*He shows the written text of his intervention at the Synod, which is completely presented below. Ed.'s Note*):

As many African states (Nigeria inclusive) are still in the process of maximizing their full economic potentialities, the Church in Africa is also consistently growing as the faith is taking firmer root in the continent.

Both the African state and Church, however, are confronted with a threat that might not only shatter her dream but also pose a serious crisis to the entire globe. I am referring to the tragic condition of youths in Africa.

Youths and children make up about 63% of our population. Unfortunately, up to 71% of them are confronted with the threat of uncertain future as they languish in pitiable conditions. Most of them work hard to secure not just their own future but those of their families as their aging parents are frequently denied of their pensions and very few are capable of providing for the family. It is sad to mention that even though Africans have strong bond with their root and heritage as a people, over 60% of African youths are convinced that migrating to the western world is the sole security for their future and that of their families.

Almost 7 or 8 out of every 10 young people believe that migrating away from home holds the key to their future. A considerable number of these youths lack formidable formal education and knowledge of technical skills. A number of them lack the proper mental, physical and social preparation for migration. Yet they are often desperate and determined to do so through often life-threatening means, due to the dire economic and political situation of the continent.

The conditions in which many of these young and vibrant Africans migrate are miserable and inhuman. In the search for greener pastures, there is often the loss of core cultural values and moral principles. They become easy pawns for abuses of every sort and are often victims of traffickers and captives of modern slave traders *cum* owners.

I am of the opinion that more pastoral aid and support should be given to the youths. The youths should be better catechetized and well-grounded in the social teaching of the Church in a manner that they are able to make mature decisions and

learn to turn deserts into lush gardens. The Church has to find means of providing technical support for skilled and unskilled youths, thereby filling up the gaps created by successive political administrators. A wholesome mental formation and reorientation will go a long way in producing creative and passionate youths who will be totally dedicated to the task of building their nations and correcting the mistakes of the past.

The Catholic Voyage: *Finally, what word of advice and encouragement do you have for the Formators in the Formation Houses and seminaries, the Vocations Directors, and Christian youth leaders in Nigeria drawing from your experiences these weeks of the Synod of Bishops?*

Bishop John Oyejola: First, for the formators. Formation can be challenging. When I was a youth chaplain, I would not take nonsense; and so they gave me a nickname: "Marshall", a difficult man. Yet, they will still come back to me, when they want the truth. Many of them did not like me. So, I was not doing things for them to like me. I was doing things for them to be good people. But in the long run, they not only like me, they love me. So, I will encourage the formators not to do things to make them become popular among the seminarians or among candidates for Consecrated Life. But they should do things that would make young people and candidates in formation see the Formator as somebody who is truthful, sincere and direct. Because you cannot lie to young people. If you lie to them today, tomorrow when they discover you have lied to them, they will hate you forever. But today, when you are doing the right thing they may not like you, while in the long run they will see you did the right thing and will come to love you. In a word, formators may find some challenges in their apostolate, but they should not give up but must continue to strive and do the best they can.

So also for the Vocations Director, and the Youth Leaders. They should just do the right thing. All of us are called to be witnesses to the truth. There is only one Truth, and that is Jesus Christ.

The Catholic Voyage: *Thank you for the time and the opportunity to share with us your thoughts concerning the Synod of Bishops on young people as it relates to Africa, especially Nigeria, and the Consecrated Life today.*

Bishop John Oyejola: It is my joy, Fr. Ogunu.