

Online Panel Discussion

“Small Christian Communities on Campus and Beyond”

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How to Reach Catholic Young Adults Today: A Variety of Voices and Quotations

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Good evening. People may ask why a 85-year-old priest is giving a talk on Catholic Young Adults. Allow me to share this story. At our first class on [Small Christian Communities](#) (SCCs) at Tangaza University College in Nairobi, Kenya the students, all in their 20s, started calling me *mzee* (the Swahili word for “elder”) as a title of respect. But I said, “No. No. Not yet. Not yet. Please give me another name.” So, the next day they started calling me *kijana wa zamani* that means “a youth from a long time ago.” I like that much better.

To follow the excellent presentations of Kevin and Paulina, I would like share a variety of voices and quotations on our topic to stimulate our reflections and discernment. I draw on examples from the United States and Kenya. I start with [Catholic Young Adults](#) first.

Catholic Young Adults

1. Catholic Young Adult Leader: “Please don’t use churchy language with us young adults. ‘Synodality’ is churchy. Use ‘walking together.’ Please don’t use Latin. “Working Document” is enough. You don’t need “*Instrumentum Laboris*” too.”
2. Vivian Cabrere after college: “I searched for a spiritual home in the most logical place: my parish’s young adult group. And it was...fine. They offered the sacraments and adoration and the occasional praise and worship session that are all beautiful experiences. They offered lectures and fellowship at the local pub—again, perfectly fine evenings. But I was looking for something more. What I now realize was missing from these groups was a safe space where one can be vulnerable, be honest and feel at home.”
3. College Student in a Christian Life Community (CLC) gathering at Santa Clara University, California, USA the day before exams: “I need this period of prayer, reflection and faith-sharing to ‘ground me’ for the intellectual challenge and pressure in the busy exam days ahead.”
4. College student: “We young people today are not necessarily angry with or opposed to the Catholic Church. We simply feel that it is not relevant to our lives. The litmus test for many of us Catholic Gen Zers is not mass on Sunday, but service projects, immersion

trips and other outreach activities.”

5. College Student at Michigan State University, Michigan, USA: “I was a devout Catholic who went to a Catholic High School on the East Coast. Every Sunday I went to mass with my parents. In my first year at Michigan State I dutifully participated in Sunday Mass on the campus. Then I began to “drift” and didn’t find mass that interesting. I joined an Evangelical Church on campus that had lively singing, a band and entertaining sermons. But after a few months I felt something was missing. I had an unfulfilled yearning, desire, hunger for something more. Finally, I discovered that I really missed the Eucharist at the Catholic Mass. So I returned to the Catholic Church on campus and now feel very nourished by receiving Jesus Christ every Sunday in the sacrament of the Eucharist.”
6. While visiting Loyola University in New Orleans, Louisiana, USA in May 2023, I met a lecturer who said she was a devoted member of a Christian Life Community (CLC) while an undergraduate. Then for some years she continued in an active Alumni CLC. When I asked her why she and her friends stopped their small community gatherings she answered, "Babies."
7. My grandniece in New Jersey, USA: “Uncle Joe, in your homilies and talks you should always use humor.”

Research Studies

8. Respondent to the [Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate](#) (CARA)’s research question on “how to invite young adults to participate in Small Faith Communities in the United States?”: “If I had this answer, I would be the most famous person in the world.”
9. Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) Research Study: “60% of Catholic Young Adults (ages 18 to 35)'s Faith Community Activities in the United States are outside the parish. They participate in faith-related small groups.”
10. Springtide Research Institute: “More than 50% of Catholics ages 13 to 25 said that they don’t like to be ‘told answers’ about faith and religion.”
11. Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) data for 2022: “A youth in Kenya is any person between the age of 15 years and 30 years. Presently Kenya has a population of 75% below the age of 35 years.
12. [AMECEA](#) (Catholic Bishops Office in Eastern Africa) Pastoral Department: “A survey was done in Nairobi, Kenya on where to find young Catholics on Sunday morning. The results: You do not find them outside of church after mass. You find them on social media.”
13. AMECEA (Catholic Bishops Office in Eastern Africa) SCCs Training Team: “After consulting many young people, we came up with a format for listening sessions of 10-15

young people especially college students. We spent a lot of time on our process and group dynamics. When I asked a student coordinator what is the most important part of the gathering, she immediately answered: “food.” Another student used a mantra “feed them and they will come.” So at different sessions we always start with pizza or tasty sandwiches.”

14. [U.S. National Synthesis for the 2021-2024 Synod](#): “This reflects a longing among the People of God for a meaningful encounter with Jesus Christ.”
15. [SCCs Facebook Page](#): “Remember the famous line from the musical *The Sound of Music*: ‘When God closes a door somewhere God opens a window.’ When the Covid-19 pandemic closed the door of in-person gatherings on college campuses, Zoom opened the window of online/virtual/digital gatherings. Thus college students began using Zoom to meet and reflect together and also [Alumni began using Zoom](#) to meet and reflect together.”

Individual Voices/Quotations

16. Pope Francis: “How many of you young people spend two minutes reading the *Gospel* of the day? Two minutes!”
17. Bishop Daniel Flores when interviewed after the drafting of the [North American Continental Synthesis](#) in February, 2023: “We have failed to incorporate the voice of Catholic Youth Adults in this document.”
18. Cardinal Michael Czerny, SJ: “The biggest challenge in the Catholic Church today is the gap between Young People and the Institutional Catholic Church.”
19. Father Tom Reese, SJ: “Lectionary-based Catholics can change the world.” If we could get Catholics to read the Sunday Scripture readings each week before they come to Mass, it would be revolutionary. If you do not read and pray the *Scriptures*, you are not an adult Christian.”
20. Sister Mary Evelyn Jegan, SND: “My nephew drifted away from the Catholic faith and stopped going to mass on Sunday. Every Thursday, however, he visits an elderly man in a nursing home and gives him a shave. Now my nephew goes to mass on Thursdays.”
21. Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo, OFM Cap: “The privileged place to experience family spirit and synodality is the Small Christian Community.”
22. An American Oratorian Priest (congregation of St. John Henry Newman) in his ministry is visiting Catholic High Schools in Brooklyn Diocese, New York, USA to meet with graduating seniors to discuss their key transition to College/University life in Fall, 2023. The priest is emphasizing the importance of connecting to Campus Ministry Activities and Programs at Newman Centers (secular, private and public colleges) and Catholic

Centers (Catholic Colleges) to nourish the Young Person’s ongoing faith life on campus including mass, Small Faith-Sharing Communities and service/outreach programs. He himself appreciated the Newman Center at Bucknell University in Pennsylvania, USA where he went to college.

23. At the Press Conference in Rome on Friday, 20 April, 2023 Sister Nathalie presented the Report of the Synodal Continental Task Force and emphasized “that the strong experience of Small Christian Communities/Base Ecclesial Communities in Asia, Africa and Oceania is an experience of synodality.”

So these are some voices, some quotations. As I continue with deep listening to Catholic Young Adults as we walk together in the Synodal Process, I hear that an encounter with Jesus Christ and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ are very important to Catholic Young Adults today both

- on the right wing¹ (the conservative, traditional, devotional group that emphasizes Jesus as one’s personal savior and Mass/Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament) and
- on the left wing (the liberal, progressive, social outreach group that emphasizes Jesus as a social justice activist and shares his ministry to the marginated and those on the peripheries of society). **NOTE:** It must be pointed out that many Young Adult social activists have no explicit religious values.

Catholic Young Adults are responding positively to Retreats or Recollection Days (in-person, online and hybrid) that focus on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ with more emphasis on more silence and small group sharing. Nigerian theologian Father Stan Ilo based in Chicago, Illinois, recently pointed out that people are leaving the Catholic Church and joining Pentecostal Churches for various reasons, especially the Catholic Church’s failure to point them to Jesus.

So what are our conclusions? Here are some takeaways:

1. Reaching Catholic Young Adults today is both very difficult and very important.
2. We have to reach out to Catholic Young Adults today where they are at – on their terms, in their language and styles, in their priorities. Often this means interacting on social media including ChatGPT and various types of Artificial Intelligence (AI).
3. SCC priorities for Catholic Young Adults can be effectively carried out today through online SCCs national and international networking – that may or may not be connected to national and international SCCs organizations and gatherings (in-person, on-line and hybrid). This online networking includes interactive websites, Zoom, Skype, Google

¹ It has been said that these expressions of “left” and “right” should be avoided since they encourage polarization.

Meet, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube Archives/Storage and other social networks.

4. Catholic Young Adults are searching for community and mutual support including Small Faith Sharing Communities (in person, online, hybrid) where they can feel at home with their peers and have a safe space to share and seek together. This is both in Campus Small Communities and in Alumni Small Communities.
5. Mentoring is important: both older people mentoring Young Adults and Young Adults mentoring Young Adults – like to like and peer to peer. This is Young Adults evangelizing Young Adults.
6. Let us listen deeply to the Holy Spirit as we walk together, as we journey together.

NOTE: This event was recorded and is available permanently on YouTube on the TAC Website under “Events” in the menu at the top of the Front Page of [Today's American Catholic](#).

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