



Youth Responsibility in Making the World Liveable: A Theological Perspective

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Abstract

The task of making the world a more liveable place is the responsibility of all in the society. The young people have the special role in this responsibility because they are the future of every society and constitute its most vibrant workforce. This essay reflects from a theological perspective on this special responsibility of the youth in the contemporary society. It examines the immense potentials of being young and explains how the young people can use these potentials to bring about positive change in the society.

Introduction

Any study on the development of the youth is always a topical one because the youth is the hope of every society. The title of this essay presupposes that the young people have a great responsibility in the society. Sometimes, people tend to stress the rights of the youth without equal emphasis on the responsibilities. The rate of crimes in the society is often rationalized on the factor that many young people are unemployed, as if that in itself justifies crime or as if all who commit crimes are from the ranks of the unemployed. Be that as it may, the present discussion focuses on what the youth can do to promote living in the society. Since the essay is giving a theological perspective, the approach will be both analytical and practical.

The term “responsibility” is closely related to the word vocation. A call imposes on the called certain duties or responsibilities. The responsibility of the youth refers to the duty of the youth, and this is intrinsically linked to the vocation of the youth. Youth responsibility can, thus, be understood as the youth response to youth vocation. This is related to the theme of the recent synod by the Catholic Bishops in Rome. The synod, which was the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, was held in Rome in 2018, and its theme was “Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment.” According to Pope Francis, the theme has the aim of accompanying the young on their existential journey to maturity so that they will be in a position to discover their plan for life and realize it with joy, through a process of discernment. This will make them to open up to the encounter with God and with human beings, thus actively participating in the edification of the Church and of society.

To function properly in the society, young people need to discern their vocation and this has to be anchored on faith. They also need to take stock of the immense opportunities at their disposal. The Synod recognizes this in its final document, where it talks of the immense opportunities provided by the new media: “The internet and social networks are a public square where the young spend much of their time and meet one another easily, even if not all have equal access to it, particularly in some regions of the world. They provide an extraordinary opportunity for dialogue, encounter and exchange between persons, as well as access to information and knowledge.”

The internet has revolutionized the acquisition of knowledge today, making it impossible to remain ignorant and stay relevant in the contemporary world. According to Chris Uwaje, “The emergence of the internet is creating a society that would be run by people who have tremendous skills, access and are able to receive information, to build, manipulate corporations and societies. (Uwaje, 1981). The social media offer the young people today quick access to information and knowledge which are necessary for their proper functioning in the society, as the opportunities help them to discover their vocation. The question is, How is the youth to be trained to thrive effectively in this new knowledge driven world?”

Meaning of Youth

The term “youth” is a social category that naturally opens itself to diverse definitions, all depending on how a given society views young people. The fact is that youth as a relational concept is culturally and historically constructed, linked to how a particular culture or epoch constructs age and maturity (Wyn, & White (1997). In some situations, people set the maximum age limit for youth at eighteen years, some twenty-one years, some twenty-five years, while some put the limit at thirty. Yet, in some situations, all below the age of forty are considered as belonging to the category of youth. At times, the term youth is distinguished from the social category “children”, but at other times the two terms are lumped together with the common designation as youth. This last categorization is presupposed in many modern applications of the term, such as when one talks of youth sports, youth movements, youth associations and youth competition. In such situations, the general categorization youth is often further broken down into different age grades: childhood, adolescence and young adulthood. The use of the term youth in this essay will follow the lines of this general understanding of the term while at the same time presupposing the different age grades of youth.

Reality of the Youth Today

The contemporary society is blessed with a vibrant youth force, and no continent is left out in this. The situation is particularly overwhelming in the less developed parts of the world, where the youth makes up a larger majority of each nation’s population. According to Pope Benedict XVI, “Youth is a time when genuine and irrepressible questions arise about the meaning of life and the direction our own lives should take. Only God can give the true answer to these questions. Concern for young people calls for courage and clarity in the message we proclaim; we need to help young people to gain confidence and familiarity with sacred Scripture so it can become a compass pointing out the path to follow (Pope Benedict XVI).”

The intrinsic connection between youth and life is most felt in the African society. Africans are known for their love of life which is expressed both in their boisterous celebrations of life and in their love of having children. It is, therefore, not surprising that the younger generation constitutes a great majority in the population of every African country. This implies a large resource in workforce and other areas of development where the youthful energy is required. But, unfortunately, this has not always been the case in the modern African society. A study of the African youth by a team of scholars presents this picture:

In Africa, young people constitute the majority of the population and are at the centre of social interactions and transformations. Yet children and youth are often placed at the margins of the public sphere and major political, socio-economic, and cultural processes. The challenging situation on the continent today makes young people particularly vulnerable. Many have little or no access to education, employment and livelihoods, healthcare and basic nutrition. Over the past two decades, political conflict, armed violence, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic created a crisis of unprecedented proportions for younger generations of Africans. Within this stressful environment, how do young people organize and make sense of their daily lives? How do they

negotiate their private and public roles and envision their futures? (Honwana, & F. De Boeck, 2005).

As these scholars point out, Africa is plagued by many scourges, and one of the most horrendous is the increasing rate of youth unemployment that leaves the greater number of the workforce jobless. But side by side with this state of joblessness is the fact that most of these young Africans are considered unemployable because of one form of educational deficiency or the other. Anthony O. Ewherido and Lazarus-Mary Ishaku sum it: “Thus, what we see today is a group of young men and women living an idle life, confused and hopeless. Our youths face serious identity crises and lack self-knowledge. They are neither given the proper formation to lead the nation out of this social problem nor are they formed to be self-reliant.” (Ewherido & Mary, 2018). All these can be said of most of the young people in other societies, but the situation is most critical in the African context. The sum of it is that while many young Africans are eager to succeed in life they are handicapped in terms of competence and capacity. This is, however, not always their fault, as they are victims of grossly inadequate formation processes both in content and in form. What this writer has personally observed after many years of encountering the Nigerian and African youth at different levels can be summarized in four adjectives: The African youth is basically very talented and boisterous but mostly misguided and disoriented. This identified ailment influences the nature of the youth contribution to the social and political life.

This point is underscored by the Fathers of the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops (2009) as they address the situation of the African youth: “In many countries of Africa, youth are faced with many problems and challenges, making them particularly vulnerable due to an inadequate personal formation and education, unemployment, political exploitation, drug abuse, etc. Such situations leave youth feeling frustrated and rejected.” The Synod Fathers (2009) further lament the reckless treatment of African children and the denial of their fundamental human rights due to superstitious beliefs or one form of social stigma or the other. In the face of all these, the Synod Fathers (2009) propose, among other things, a biblical catechesis for the African youth as an effective way of empowering them to become agents of reconciliation, justice and peace. This essay becomes one way of responding to this recommendation of the Synod Fathers. This involves presenting the biblical text in such a way that it brings out the power of the word of God to effect a genuine transformation of self and society.

Youth Responsibility

The primary question here is: What can the youth contribute to make the society liveable? The question may appear simple at the surface, but a deeper reflection shows that it is not that simple. But how does one define a society that is liveable? What an atheistic culture may call a liveable society may be different from what a deeply God-centred culture may call a liveable society. The values are not necessarily the same. So, in talking of youth contribution to a liveable society, one has to agree on the type of society desired. From the Catholic theological perspective, a liveable society must be a society built on the basis of sound biblical principles of righteousness, justice, mercy and fear of God, a society characterized by such spiritual values as Paul lists in Gal 5:22-23: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. It is within such a society that genuine human developments flourish.

Any transformation of the society must be from the point of view of that which promises life. The transformation plan must be one that presents the possibility of a fulfilling life. It must be one capable of promoting and enhancing life and showing the way to its fullness. Young people

everywhere are known for their love of life and for their passion for ideas that challenge them to make the best of life. The real question then is: What can the youth do to enhance the realization of such a society?

It is not enough to identify a list of things that the youth can do, one must also examine the basic factors that can promote such responsible activity. The responsibility of the youth to make the society liveable must begin from the obligation of the youth to be truly converted and get properly informed and educated. The contribution to the society becomes more effective when it is coming from a background of faith and sound education.

In this light, the discussion is carried out theologically on three main levels: i. recognition of youth endowments; ii. development of youth endowments; iii. actualization or application of youth endowments.

Recognition of Youth Endowments

The first step to being somebody in life and making genuine contributions to society is to be aware or conscious of one's identity and personal worth. Who we are influences what we do. This is where one talks of vocation. The first task in life is to discover one's vocation. Once this is done, the whole business of living gets a proper and coherent orientation. Discernment is very crucial at this point. Otherwise, there is the danger of tinkering with every new idea and career. Ordinarily, a young person is fascinated by every new idea. Many get very confused because they lack orientation. Pope Benedict XVI told the Youth at Madrid in 2011, "Youth is a special time of hope because it looks to the future with a whole range of expectations. When we are young we cherish ideals, dreams and plans. Youth is the time when decisive choices concerning the rest of our lives come to fruition."

The recognition of personal endowments gives one confidence to forge ahead in difficult moments. This can be better clarified with light from sacred Scripture. Our particular focus is on John 6:1-15 which presents a very interesting scenario.

John 6:1-15

The import of this text of John 6:1-15 flashed across my mind as I went through the Final Document of the Synod on the Youth, where the text was cited. A reference was made to the fact that "Jesus was able to perform the miracle thanks to the availability of a young man who generously offered what he had" (cf. John 6:8-11). The biblical text has a way of provoking new ideas in the reader, even after it has been read several times. This is because, as the medium of God's word, the Bible is always a context for the action of the Holy Spirit. It is illuminating that Jesus was able to feed the immense crowd because a young man generously offered the little he had. As I pondered on the text, its immense riches for faith and human promotion poured out.

The text of John 6:1-15 is the story of the feeding of the five thousand with five barley loaves and two fish. Jesus saw a large crowd coming to him and felt compassion for the people. He challenged his disciples to feed the crowd, and wanted to know how much it would cost. He wanted them to get positively involved in alleviating the problem of hunger in this crowd. Jesus as a mentor knew the power in his youthful community. He challenged them to recognize that power and apply it. The disciples thought he was kidding. Their response is interesting: Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." For Philip, it was a near impossibility for them to feed the immense crowd. The matter must have perturbed the young community. The master wanted them to feed the crowd but did not provide the wherewithal. Jesus knew all this, but he was challenging their faith. One cannot

genuinely change the society without believing in oneself and in the power of God. Difficult situations demand strong faith.

In this situation of crisis, Andrew was quick to observe a point of light somewhere. He was seeing a young man who could offer some solution. “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” (John 6:9). Jesus definitely already saw this important game-changing provision in the possession of the young boy, but he wanted his disciples to recognize it. Characteristically, it was Andrew who did. He was the same Andrew that first recognized Jesus and went to call his brother Peter, telling him, “We have found the Messiah” (John 1:41).

Andrew has a way of seeing what the Master wants his disciple to see. This time it is the young boy with two barley loaves and two fish that he sees. This young boy possesses some resources that can help the community, but the resources are grossly in short supply. For Andrew, the quantity is insignificant for the large crowd, but for Jesus, this will do. Faith is needed to surrender our little resources and endowments to the power of God. This is what Jesus does with the little provision. The contribution of the young man eventually gets divinely transformed. In the process, the society gets positively changed.

Here we see a model of how one can contribute to enhance life in the community, even when the quantity of what one possesses appears insignificant. Interestingly, the characters involved in the context are young people, including Jesus himself. What seems small in human eyes can become the key to open new avenues of life and welfare. Young people have great gifts that can turn the society around. But there is need for one who recognizes the value of these gifts. Jesus shows strong and admirable leadership here. He motivates his group to put the little they have at the disposal of all, and in the process, life is better enhanced. Young people need motivators and motivations to put their talents to work.

Development of Youth Endowments

Responsibility has to do with action in the light of one’s endowments or talents. To function effectively, one needs to develop one’s potentials. This is the whole task of education. It is not enough to have talents; one must develop the talents and know how to use them. One important aspect of youth formation is skill acquisition, and this can be looked at from different perspectives. Since the orientation in this discussion is theological, the best anchor remains the biblical text. A peep into the book of Proverbs will help.

Book of Proverbs

The book of Proverbs is heavily anchored on the training of the youth. One cannot miss this famous wise saying in the book: “Train up a child in the way he should go, And when he is old he will not depart from it” (Prov 22:6). The Book of Proverbs recognizes the value of educating the youth to such an extent that the entire book is written for the purpose. The opening part of the book makes it clear that the book was written “for teaching sound judgment to the simple, and knowledge and reflection to the young” (Prov 1:4). The purpose of the book is summed up in 1:2 as leading the young on the part of knowing and understanding (See, 2018). The two principal Hebrew verbs in this context are “knowing” (yada‘) and “understanding” (habîn).

Knowing (yada‘) refers to an experiential acquaintance with reality, that is, being acquainted with the world and environment of experience. Understanding (habîn), on the other hand, expresses a power of judgment towards the object perceived. It involves a critical discrimination of the data of one’s information and acquaintances to determine their real meaning and significance. In the Hebrew biblical context, it is through knowing and understanding that one acquires wisdom (hokmāh). In the Hebrew usage, the noun hokmāh has

the sense of “superior mental ability or special skill” (Scott, 1972). Thus, a wise person in the Hebrew context is one who has acquired a special skill. The much trumpeted education for skill acquisition in the contemporary world was represented in the Hebrew context as wisdom acquisition. Thus, the most effective way the youth can contribute positively to society is through the acquisition of wisdom. In sum, the study of Proverbs trains one in the acquisition of skill and self-control together with the intellectual ability to penetrate or interpret words that have deep meaning. These are the qualities that can help the youth to develop their inner talents and contribute more positively to society.

As life presents many astonishing facets, the book of Proverbs is designed to guide the reader and especially the youth on the right way to approach it. The book, as Anthony R. Ceresko puts it, “represents a prodigious effort to rule or master the chaos and confusion of daily life. (Clifford, 1999)” Proverbs was written to help the youth to abandon foolishness and acquire wisdom for better living in the society. There is a very thin line between the youth and the fool and, most of the time foolishness is the lot of the youth, as foolishness is simply the lack of knowledge and understanding. According to Norman Gottwald, the goal of wisdom is “to develop life strategies that will integrate the individual’s existence with the perceived order of the world (Norman Gottwald, 1985).

Actualization/Application of Youth Endowments

The recognition of youth endowments and their development through knowing and understanding facilitate their application to the society for better living. Again, the action here is guided by faith. The text of John 6:1-15 shows how the crowd of five thousand (5000) was fed with only five barley loaves and two fish. The miracle was achieved because this little quantity was surrendered to the transforming power of God. Human resources alone cannot change the society for better, however wonderful such resources may be. There is always need to work with faith.

The Bible makes it clear that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. This means that it is through the fear of God that one acquires the real power to change the world. But one may ask: What is meant here by the fear of the Lord? Gerhard von Rad explains it well, “The fear of God not only enabled a man to acquire knowledge, but also had a predominantly critical function in that it kept awake in the person acquiring the knowledge the awareness that his intellect was directed towards a world in which mystery predominated. This fear of God has trained him to openness, to readiness for an encounter even with the inscrutable and the imponderable, that is, it has taught him that the sphere in which definite, verifiable orders can be discerned is a very limited one (von, 1972). For von Rad, effective knowledge about God is the only thing that puts one into a right relationship with the objects of one’s perception (Murphy, 1998). What von Rad is saying, in effect, is that it is only when people realize that their knowledge of God is terribly limited that they can begin to appreciate one another with greater humility and understanding. Then they develop greater tolerance and readiness to listen to others, learn from others and work with them.

Conclusion

The responsibility to make the society liveable is a lifelong one. The present essay has focused particularly on the youth to expose the fact that young people have immense potentialities that can be put to better use for the positive growth of the society. The issue has been examined on three levels, namely, the recognition of youth endowments, the development of youth endowments and the actualization of youth endowments. The energy that drives all these is faith. The youth needs a committed faith in the power of God to be able to recognize, develop and actualize their immense potentials.

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