

# THE CARDINALS' FORUM



## @ Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary

*an annual gathering that advances the academic formation of seminarians and provides continuing education for the lay faithful about a topic of contemporary concern*

Thursday, **August 30, 2018** in the **Vianney Hall Auditorium**

on the topic of

## **“Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment”**

([www.synod2018.va](http://www.synod2018.va))

presentation by

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Thank you for joining us this evening, with special thanks to those who don't live here on the seminary campus. Thanks, too, for giving me the opportunity to join you this evening – especially at my age, which is twice as old as the "young adults" that are the subject of the upcoming Synod! So, speaking as an outsider, I'd like to consider, and raise questions about, each of the three terms in our topic.

First, "**young people.**" Whether in the seminary or not, you who are in that age group envisioned by the Synod represent the "digital generation." We who are immigrants to this new world order tend to be enchanted with the mystique of communications technologies. But you natives see it quite differently. As noted by the hundreds of youth who participated in the pre-synodal meeting, "The impact of social media in the lives of young people cannot be understated. Social media is a significant part of young people's identity and way of life."<sup>1</sup> My generation may wonder why you spend so much time on devices, but I suspect you don't even notice it, because they are part and parcel of your daily existence.

What we all must grapple with is the effect those devices are having on what it means to be who we are. The working document of the Synod identifies four areas in which "the irruption of digital technology is starting to have a very profound impact,"<sup>2</sup> areas which are vastly different from the world with which the Church has long been familiar:

- First, digital media create a different notion of *time and space*. At the press of a button, you can connect with anyone instantly. But the Church, it is said, thinks in centuries!
- Second, digital media foster a new kind of *self-perception*. In a networked world, you are what you show in your profile and what you share in your posts. The alterability and brevity of those interactions clashes with the permanent structures and dense documents of a centuries-old Church.
- Third, digital media engender a different *way of looking at others and the world*. Your connections are numerous and wide-ranging, which reveal your deeper desire to connect to something bigger than yourself. But that desire tends to find fulfillment in growing your social network or engaging in a social cause more so than in exploring the heights of heaven and the promise of an eternal life.
- Finally, digital media are shaping in you a new approach to *learning* and understanding. Having grown up in what Brett Robinson calls *Appletopia*, where "Think Different" is the prevailing motto, you've embraced the "spectre of technology," which is described as the quest "to eliminate contingency further from experience and to inherit the power of the deity: being omnipresent, everywhere at once, and omniscient, knowing all there is to know."<sup>3</sup>

I realize that's painting a picture of your generation with a rather broad brush. But I think a quick glance around any public place will show that the new media have "become part of the natural

order of things," appearing even to be a new religion "practiced in the ritual use of technology and the worship of the self that the technologies ultimately foster."<sup>4</sup>

The religiosity of technology brings us to the second term of the Synod – **"the faith."** Given the pervasive reality of the digital world, the young people at the pre-synodal meeting expressed a natural desire that the Church encounter them there. "We would like to see," they said, "a Church that is accessible through social media as well as other digital spaces." Why? So as "to more easily and effectively offer information ... and to further the formation of the young person."<sup>5</sup>

Now, despite the faculty position I hold here at the seminary, I suspect that plea will be a big challenge for the Church! As the Synod's working document confesses, Church leaders have a hard time understanding the language of networked communications.<sup>6</sup> Most of them are not fully cognizant of the metamorphosis that information technology is bringing about in the lives of young people.<sup>7</sup> And many have not yet accepted the fact that digital life is not about high-powered devices in a virtual world distinct from the real world, but is, instead, the very culture in which you live and grow, work and play, and even believe.<sup>8</sup>

Still, I think young people may be lacking in their notion of what the encounter of faith entails. Faith is far more than "easy and effective" information. It comes not from the touch of a screen or an app, but from the touch of the Holy Spirit in one's soul. That's the sacred space of a person which technology cannot reach – not now and not ever! Here I agree totally with Robinson's conclusion when he says,

Personal technology has become "the very atmosphere and medium" through which we mediate our daily lives. The question that remains is whether this mode of perception brings us any closer to recognizing the transcendent hidden at the heart of that which is not digitized or downloaded.<sup>9</sup>

And there, in the realm of the heart and the soul, is where the third term comes into play – **"vocational discernment."** The Synod's working document offers an insightful look at what this discernment entails in terms of listening, openness, and action.<sup>10</sup>

- Discernment is "a way of life, a style, a fundamental attitude" of hearing the voice of the Lord. To discern is to listen; to listen is to obey (from the Latin *ob* "to" and *audire* "listen, hear").
- In obedience to the Holy Spirit, discernment engenders an "openness to new things, courage to move outwards, and resistance to the temptation of reducing what is new to what we already know."
- And discernment is intended to "become a driver for our actions, the ability to be creatively faithful to the one single mission the Church has always been entrusted with."

Put simply, discernment is a human self-reflection in light of divine inspiration. Doing the work of discernment will certainly be a challenge in a world of faith dominated by digital media. As Archbishop Chaput once wrote, "visual and electronic media ... need a certain kind of content. They thrive on brevity, speed, change, urgency, variety and feelings. But *thinking* requires the opposite. Thinking takes time. It needs silence ...."<sup>11</sup>

Now it's time for me to be silent. So, taking up the threefold approach of the synod's working document, let me conclude by asking ...

- Can young people, existing as you do in the digital world, *recognize* the divine mystery at work in your lives, there where technology does not reach?
- Do you *interpret* your faith not simply as information, but more fundamentally as a relationship to be developed in terms of an ongoing encounter with Jesus Christ in and through the Church?
- Will you have the courage not simply to consider but actually to *choose* the way of life to which God is calling you as the only one in which you will find the happiness you seek?

This old-timer certainly hopes you will answer those questions in the affirmative!

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<sup>1</sup> Document from the Pre-Synodal Meeting (Rome, 19-24 March 2018), no. 4; also included in the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, no. 34.

<sup>2</sup> *Instrumentum Laboris*, no. 57.

<sup>3</sup> Brett T. Robinson, *Appletopia: Media Technology and the Religious Imagination of Steve Jobs* (Baylor University Press, 2013), page 68 and note 23.

<sup>4</sup> Robinson, *Appletopia*, pp. 100, 101.

<sup>5</sup> Document from the Pre-Synodal Meeting, no. 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Instrumentum Laboris*, no. 35.

<sup>7</sup> *Instrumentum Laboris*, no. 57.

<sup>8</sup> *Instrumentum Laboris*, no. 161.

<sup>9</sup> Robinson, *Appletopia*, p. 106.

<sup>10</sup> *Instrumentum Laboris*, no. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Archbishop Charles Chaput, "News media failing to fulfill its role in our democracy," *Catholic News Agency*, 9 July 2009.