



Youth as Stewards of Our Planet for a More Fraternal and Supportive Society

Vatican Youth Symposium 2017



Our era is one of great tension and anxiety. With multilateralism on the wane, narrower visions of nationalism, exclusivism, and even xenophobia are on the rise. International law is increasingly derided and disrespected, with the rise of political bullying and a “might is right” attitude. As Pope Francis says, we are already living through another world war, albeit one fought piecemeal, which – in tandem with encroaching environmental stress – is leading to mass displacement of peoples and the greatest humanitarian crisis since the Second World War. On the economic front, a technocratic paradigm in tandem with an individualistic ethos has given rise to a global economy driven by greed and lust for profit, leading to massive social exclusion and environmental degradation. In a world of unprecedented levels of wealth, the persistence of shocking poverty, inequality, hunger, lack of access to education, modern slavery and degrading work conditions, human trafficking, and deaths caused by preventable and treatable disease reflects what Pope Francis calls the “globalization of indifference.” Even rich countries are not immune to social maladies, as their citizens experience rising levels of insecurity, restlessness, and dissatisfaction. Most citizens of the United States, Europe, North Africa and parts of Latin America believe their countries are not on “the right track”.

What is clear is that the current crisis is a crisis of values. It is not so much a lack of financial or technical capacity as “moral capacity.” As Pope Francis wrote in *Laudato Si'*, “our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience.” The rise of relativism, practical nihilism, boundless consumerism, and the

general eclipse in values is directly related to the tension, anxiety, and malaise of our modern age.

It is therefore timely to reconsider the values at the foundation of our individual, social, political and economic life – especially for the younger generation. The ceaseless pursuit of ever-greater profits does not lead to happiness and fulfilment. A one-dimensional focus on material wealth leads only to spiritual poverty. Economic progress can improve quality of life in many ways, but only if it goes hand-in-hand with values that are coherent with human nature, which is made up of body and soul, seeking both material and spiritual possessions, market and non-market goods.

Thus, we arrive at the eternal question that Aristotle used as an opening for his *Ethics* and his *Politics*, that is, how to achieve the happiness that “all human beings naturally desire”[1] in today’s world, marked as it is by rapid urbanisation, increasing mass communication, prevailing individualism, global capitalism, and environmental decay.

From this perspective, the main moral issue is not only what I should do – that is, deontology in the Kantian sense – but rather how I should lead my life to achieve happiness before God, myself, other people, and the environment. This differs from modern notions that link happiness to such extrinsic goods as wealth, power, or fame, or the idea that happiness is individualistic in nature. Aristotle, in contrast, showed that social values such as justice, equity, and solidarity are essential to human flourishing. At the beginning of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, he is clear that the goal of happiness is not perfection in solitude but in the context of the city, the *polis*. And modern research confirms the validity of these ancient insights.

As a consequence, social and economic questions must always be oriented toward the common good, which is a higher good than the good of the individual. This also applies to nations, which cannot adequately flourish unless they take into consideration the welfare of other nations in our globalized world – especially as regards matters that relate to the good of all nations (for example, water, energy, the climate...). Social values and policies that aim for the common good make up the structure of ethics.

Our key challenge, therefore, is to reorganize the social and economic life within and between nations to better inculcate the values of contemplation, prayer, community, equity, solidarity, fraternity, trust, and environmental sustainability – in other words, the values that create real rather than deceptive happiness.

This is the challenge that our fourth Youth Symposium intends to address. In particular, it will focus on the key word that expresses better than any other the need to overcome our current malaise and dysfunction: *fraternity*. This word, associated with the French Revolution, was subsequently abandoned and eliminated from the political-economic lexicon. Yet this value antedates the French Revolution. It was the evangelical testimony of St. Francis, together with his school of thought, that kept this value alive over the course of the centuries—and in doing so,

complemented and exalted the foundational principle of solidarity.

Young people all over the world today must reconsider this crucial value. They must see it as their birthright and their legacy. As Pope Francis noted in his recent message to young people: “With your plans and with your courage, with your dreams and ideals, walls of stagnation fall and roads open up that lead us to a better, fairer, less cruel and more humane world.” This Symposium will take up this challenge, asking how youth, by building on values like fraternity, can envision and create a form of progress that—in the words of Pope Francis—is “healthier, more human, more social, more integral.”