

Catholic Youth Ministry in the United States Today: Paths of Renewal through Dialogue and Engagement with Protestant Models (La Pastorale Giovanile Cattolica negli Stati Uniti oggi. Verso il suo rinnovamento a confronto e in dialogo con i modelli protestanti), ed. Paweł Wątor, LAS, Roma 2025, ISBN: 978-88-213-1639-5.

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I begin this review of an insightful volume with a quotation taken from the *Preparatory Document for the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, cited in the book: “In pastoral ministry, young people are subjects, not objects. Yet in practice they are often treated by society as a useless or inconvenient presence. The Church cannot mirror this attitude, for all young people, without exception, have the right to be accompanied along their journey. Each community is therefore called to give particular attention to poor, marginalised, and excluded young people, and to make them protagonists. (...) The Church herself is called to learn from the young: many young saints offer a luminous witness and continue to inspire all.”¹

The book presents the image of a Church that takes the first step, that cares for and truly sees young people by initiating dialogue with them - not to persuade them, not to instrumentalise them, not to offer superficial appeasements, but to recognise their presence, their gifts, and their grace. It proposes learning to listen even before speaking, and doing so sincerely, not condescendingly: dialogue grounded in listening and esteem, attention and respect, openness and humility – listening before proposing or accompanying, and without fear of questioning or being questioned in every dimension of life.



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¹ Segreteria Generale del Sinodo dei Vescovi, *Documento preparatorio alla XV Assemblea generale ordinaria del Sinodo dei Vescovi*, 13 gennaio 2017, Città del Vaticano, LEV, 2017, 49-50.

Particularly noteworthy is the author's observation on page 24: "A significant contribution to youth ministry in the United States comes not only from the Catholic Church, but above all from the educational experience developed by Protestants, which is in many respects more active and dynamic than that of Catholics. Their concern and interest for young people have led them to seek and create new models of ministry. It is therefore necessary to consider their research and solutions in light of the expectations of young people and the demands of postmodern culture. One must also highlight the ecumenical dimension of the relationship between these pastoral approaches: while mutual interest exists at the theoretical level, practical collaboration remains limited."

Although the author focuses on the North American situation, many of these reflections apply to the universal Church. He refers to the vibrancy of Catholic youth ministry in the United States, shaped by two major currents - traditional and *Latino* – with a third emerging in recent years: ministry among people with diverse sexual orientations. Many pastoral experiences in the Catholic world remain insufficiently known or shared as the Church seeks evangelical responses to the signs of the times.

The book, written in Italian, is structured in three clear sections (six chapters). The introduction and conclusion guide the reader by outlining its origins, aims, methods, challenges, opportunities, outcomes, and future perspectives. The bibliography is rich and well curated, drawing on magisterial documents and scholarly works primarily in English, with some in Italian.

The first part ("The Historical-Sociological-Theological Context of Catholic Youth Ministry in the United States") offers a three-chapter overview. Several notable insights emerge: the "boomerang generation," together with "helicopter parents," contributes to the growth of the so-called *nones* (around one-quarter of young people, and rising); *Latinos* form an increasingly significant presence, poised to reshape pastoral practice and community identity; and sexual deregulation among young people has become a consolidated reality, opening new pastoral challenges and causing divisions within Catholic communities unsure how to respond.

These trends point to a profound transformation underway. They raise the question of how the Catholic institution can prepare to face this epochal shift – both theologically and pastorally. The analysis also shows that classic pitfalls recur in every generation: youth ministry reduced to entertainment, centred on a charismatic leader now often resembling a “media guru,” or confined to strictly intellectual formation.

The second part (“The Contribution of Protestant Thought to Youth Ministry in the United States”), following the chosen methodology, investigates Protestant youth ministry theorists in search of guiding criteria for contemporary pastoral thinking. A particularly compelling aspect is the so-called theological turn in youth ministry. The Lutheran theologian Andrew Root notes that after decades of justifying youth ministry through sociological, educational, or therapeutic categories, leaders are now entering a phase in which theology becomes the norm rather than the exception. Methodist pastor and theologian Kenda Creasy Dean similarly emphasizes that this shift reflects a longing for something solid and profound with which to accompany young people – a move beyond consumerism and entertainment-driven approaches.

This represents an important, perhaps decisive, contribution for the future – one that Catholics can fruitfully share with Protestant brothers and sisters, and one that has been developing in our own university context for at least a decade: a theological vision of youth ministry capable of integrating insights from the educational and communication sciences while maintaining a clearly theological identity, thus shaping a distinctly Christian, evangelizing, missionary, vocational, and popular approach. In a pluralistic society, the ability to present one’s identity and proposals clearly is not only a right but a duty; Christian identity can only arise from faith, for which theology serves as its critical reason.

The third and final part (“Toward the Future”) projects outward. After highlighting certain weaknesses in Protestant approaches - weaknesses relevant to Catholic youth ministry as well, such as the lack of sacramental life and insufficient vocational discernment – the author proposes integrative pathways. He envisions U.S. youth ministry as “a permanent laboratory of ecclesial renewal” for all pastoral practice. Indeed, youth ministry often anticipates and inhabits the future of both the local and universal Church life.

One particularly enriching proposal is that of *Adoptive Youth Ministry*, which reimagines the Church's identity in familial terms, shaping youth ministry in an "adoptive" way: as Christians we are "adopted children" invited to become part of God's household, and by mirroring God's attitude, we too can become adoptive toward young people, welcoming them into ecclesial communion. This section concludes with a critical synthesis, interconnections, and practical proposals.

With this work, the author successfully achieves the stated goals:

- presenting the reality of the Catholic Church in the United States and the current situation of youth ministry, highlighting resources, opportunities, challenges, and difficulties;
- offering biblical-theological, pedagogical, anthropological, and pastoral criteria borrowed from Protestant youth ministry to enhance Catholic pastoral practice with young people;
- suggesting orientations and operational proposals to concretely support the overall objective.
- The methodology – both theological and critical - is also project-oriented, unfolding in three phases: a *karyological* phase (evaluative analysis of the context), a *criteriological* phase (criteria for pastoral planning), and a *strategic-projectual* phase (planning the transition from current to renewed pastoral practice).

Overall, this book stands as a significant and constructive resource for scholars, pastoral ministers, and Church leaders. Its theological clarity, ecumenical sensitivity, and pastoral realism make it an excellent contribution to youth ministry and an important guide for the Church as it seeks to accompany young people in an era of rapid transformation.