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# Service-learning pedagogy and the teachings of the Catholic Church

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Youth leadership in Service-learning  
and Synod on Young People

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## 10. YOUTH LEADERSHIP IN SERVICE-LEARNING AND SYNOD ON YOUNG PEOPLE

Mariano García

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### Abstract

This chapter aims to deepen youth leadership in solidarity Service-learning in the light of the Synod of Bishops held in Rome in 2018 under the motto: “Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment.” The relevance of linking both subjects lies in their commonalities: young people value being listened to, accompanied and invited when they are proposed to be protagonists of the transformation of their reality or the realities in which they find themselves. The Synod on young people promoted by Pope Francis has been a great opportunity to outline the keys necessary to develop listening, understanding, accompanying and encouraging the leadership and life of all young people, Catholics and those who profess other beliefs and that, with good will, they also seek to be agents that transform our reality. Service-Learning allows us to see how young students of Higher Education are protagonists of transformation and comprehensive experiences, developing meaningful projects through which they make explicit the academic content acquired, with great impact on the communities where they carry them out and, at the same time, they learn from what communities give them. The contributions of service-learning and the Synod on young people can provide enormous wealth to the identity and mission of the universities and their university pastorals to continue accompanying the life, vocation and leadership of young students.

### 1. Introduction

Young people have a genuine drive, a creative and dynamic spirit when it comes to carrying out solidarity service, facing causes that are in favour of practicing responsible citizenship and a social engagement for the most vulnerable.

In the light of the Synod on Young People, we will see that this leadership in young students is fundamental for the Catholic Church, since it allows to “rejuvenate” and truly experience a Church that is close, fraternal and constantly “*going forth*” (Pope Francis, 2013), looking after those who are on the margins of our societies.

Young people value being listened to, accompanied and invited to share their gifts when they are proposed to have a real role, where they are jointly responsible for projects that have a transformative impact on the reality in which they live.

*Leadership driven by Service-Learning in Higher Education students is an opportunity of our time, so that the identity and mission of each Catholic university is strengthened to accompany men and women of today in diverse, plural, multicultural and interreligious societies and promote a culture of encounter.*

Leadership driven by Service-Learning in Higher Education students is an opportunity of our time, so that the identity and mission of each Catholic university is strengthened to accompany men and women of today in diverse, plural, multicultural and interreligious societies and promote a culture of encounter.

Service-Learning allows students to awaken a strong leadership, because it is key in this pedagogy (Tapia, 2018): they are thereby motivated and invited to reflect, design, execute, evaluate and celebrate a project from and for the community.

It is a unique event in which students can see how the contents of their studies are put into practice and become transforming agents of their reality. It should be noted that in this chapter I will use the term Solidarity Service-learning (AYSS in its acronym in Spanish), since:

The concept used at CLAYSS and that has spread in Latin America and other regions is, in Spanish, “*aprendizaje-servicio solidario*” (solidarity service-learning). The stress is not only on “service” (a term that can be associated with charity or individual action), but on a practice of effective solidarity more oriented at “doing something together” than at “doing something for somebody”, and also aimed at encouraging collective efforts for the common good and an active citizenship that promotes rights and assumes responsibilities. (Tapia, 2018, p.21)<sup>59</sup>

## 2. Community leadership

The leadership that Higher Education students are invited to experience has to have certain characteristics that show the importance of meeting, reflecting and planning together with others.

59 Own translation

Putting oneself at the service of the community and, in turn, allowing oneself to be taught by it; because if not, you can run the risk of living a leadership that leads to individualism and an ephemeral and not very fruitful triumphalism, both personally and collectively.

Many young people carry out this community leadership by being active animators that seek joint solutions together with other academic, cultural, ecclesial spaces, etc., in the face of situations of social vulnerability. As mentioned in the final document of the Synod on Young People: “(...) *social commitment is a specific feature of today’s young people. Alongside some who are indifferent, there are many others who are ready to commit themselves to initiatives of voluntary work, active citizenship and social solidarity (...)*” (Synod of Bishops, 2018b, 46).

Young students, along with the other stakeholders who develop an SL project, experience solidarity as an encounter, as an opportunity to transform reality and sensitize the entire community (Tapia, 2018).

Generating this culture of encounter, it is observed that the people of the community are not regarded as mere recipients of a solidarity project, but as active stakeholders who are listened to, respected and valued with their innate knowledge and thus carry forward the process of social transformation. As Aranguren tells us:

*(...) Solidarity as an encounter makes the beneficiaries of its action the authentic protagonists and subjects of their process of struggle for what is fair, for the resolution of their problems, for the achievement of their personal and collective autonomy. (Aranguren, 1997, p.25)<sup>60</sup>*

Solidarity is an action that, no doubt, places the ones who practice it in a fundamental role and in a state of communion in which the afflictions of humanity are not indifferent: “*only the one who makes the brother’s or sister’s right his or her duty is in solidarity, by co-practising liberation*”. (Casaldáliga & Vigil, 1992, p.104)

Solidarity has been mistreated, among other things, because it has been pigeonholed as a light-hearted action, and it has even been used only to “calm consciences”, with actions that are born out of one’s own desire to do and not out of an encounter with others. The Holy Father makes this situation explicit:

*The word “solidarity” is a little worn and at times poorly understood, but it refers to something more than a few sporadic acts of generosity. It presumes the creation of a new mindset which thinks in terms of community and the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few. (Pope Francis, 2013, EG, 188).*

60 Own translation

*We must aspire for Higher Education students to discover in our Catholic universities a way of community solidarity, where everyone is participant and protagonist.*

We must aspire for Higher Education students to discover in our Catholic universities a way of community solidarity, where everyone is participant and protagonist.

This modality manifests itself from the curriculum to the corridor, from the laboratory to the reception, from the offices to the lecture hall. Otherwise, we run the risk of simplifying and minimizing solidarity in isolated, unsystematic actions that, although often necessary, can lead to merely a welfare-like approach.

Young people are determined to live solidarity and to work for it, since it generates a real change in the person and the community. But also, because by living solidarity, we live the hope of working together with others in diverse and plural spaces of our society for the common good.

In this sense, we see how solidarity action allows young people, who possess an admirable docility, to meet peers who develop their leadership in other religious, cultural, sports, union, student spaces, etc.

Young people often meet and work together for a humanitarian project that transforms the injustices experienced by hundreds of people around the world. As Burmese Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, Archbishop of Yangon, mentions about the youth of Myanmar:

*Young people do not accept that their hope is stolen. Their strength of mind is a great inspiration for all of us. The sense of “unity in diversity” and mutual solidarity between people of different ethnic groups and religions, side by side for the same cause, is a sign of the maturity of a people. It is good to see it emerge clearly, at a critical moment for the country.<sup>61</sup>*

For this reason, we must understand that AYSS is a pedagogy that invites us to enter into a true process of community solidarity involving educators, students and the community, to generate a common good in pursuit of a meaningful and significant practice for all.

Young people are eager to serve, to experience solidarity service. They are loyal to projects that really have a transforming coherence and that effectively announce or convey

61 (Own translation) Card, Bo, Ch.M. (12th March 2021) Interview to Burmese Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, Archbishop of Yangon, L'Osservatore Romano. Retrieved from:

<https://www.osservatoreromano.va/es/news/2021-03/en-myanmar-los-jovenes-no-aceptan-que-se-les-robe-la-esperanza.html>



a concrete message to the community. But we know that, to capitalize on these forces, we need to think of an effective methodological path in our institutional spaces.

Solidarity service-learning must be institutionalized, since it is a duty of the entire university institution that young students put the knowledge acquired at the service of the community and especially of the vulnerable and impoverished community, present in many of the societies where our institutions are located.

As Miquel Martínez says:

*The University is a living space for students and also for educators, a living space where we learn the things we live; that is, when one learns the values of solidarity and engagement, one does not learn them as ideals, but learns them better if these values exist in their learning contexts.*<sup>62</sup>

LA university is a vital space, where students should feel invited to be able to fulfil themselves, train and discover themselves as people with a life project that is achieved with a deep and systematic support.

John Paul II expressed:

*As a result of this inspiration, the community is animated by a spirit of freedom and charity; it is characterized by mutual respect, sincere dialogue, and protection of the rights of individuals. It assists each of its members to achieve wholeness as human persons; in turn, everyone in the community helps in promoting unity, and each one, according to his or her role and capacity, contributes towards decisions which affect the community, and also towards maintaining and strengthening the distinctive Catholic character of the Institution.* (John Paul II, ECE, 21).

Catholic Universities must create and maintain this vital space. Because there are many young people who spend a lot of hours in institutions. It is crucial to help grow and work to offer a space where life is cared for and valued.

As the young people told the Church on the way to the synod:

While the Church already meets many of us in schools and universities throughout the world, we want to see her presence in these places in a stronger and more effective way. Resources are not wasted when they are put into these areas as these are the places in which many young people spend most of their time and often engage with people of varied socioeconomic backgrounds. (Synod of Bishops, 2018a)

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62 UNISERVITATE, (29th October, 2020), Why a committed and supportive Higher Education today?, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Og\\_LPLUIrKg&ab\\_channel=UNISERVITATE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Og_LPLUIrKg&ab_channel=UNISERVITATE)

The University is a land of mission and meeting, where we can accompany the lives of so many young people who bring their realities, dreams, frustrations, knowledge and questions.

Our Catholic Universities must be favourable “environments” to receive the lives of students; an environment where young people do not feel that they are only a number, but people valued, cared for and invited to go through a personal, personalizing educational process and to discover the leadership that leads to serving in the community.

The University, as the Holy Father reminds us:

*(...) is a frontier which awaits you, a periphery in which to welcome and attend to man's existential poverty. Poverty in relationships, in human growth, tend to fill heads without creating a shared community plan, a common goal, an honest brotherhood. Take care to*

*The University, as the Holy Father reminds us:  
(...) is a frontier which awaits you, a periphery in which to welcome and attend to man's existential poverty.*

*always go to meet others, to catch the “scent” of today's man, until permeation with their joys and hopes, their sorrows and anguish. (Pope Francis, 2014)*

Developing SL in our Catholic Universities in an institutionalized way allows to create or recreate the University. It makes the University an environment where young students can see how their personal knowledge, and those provided in the development of learning in Higher Education, are complemented with those of their peers and other University stakeholders, to put them at the service of other environments where life demands and is threatened.

This premise is not just an elusive good wish or a negative generalization, since in many universities around the world hard work is being done effectively (there are testimonies that speak of this and confirm this) for young students to experience a social responsibility.

For young people to become aware of social responsibility is to be in communion with God's project. The project where all men and women feel loved and valued.

Service-learning enables to enhance the role of young people in their educational process from the value of service to others, and make universities truly live a liberating, comprehensive and transforming education.

As the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Global Compact on Education says about Service-Learning:

*We could point to this process as a development from education to service to education as service, whereby our brethren are both the way and the goal of education.* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2020, p.17)

Service to others is, without a doubt, the fundamental key in the learning development of Higher Education students. In this service, the true identity and mission of every Catholic University is manifested.

The mission of the University is fruitful when it serves the poorest neighbour. In that service, it is fully performed.

*Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society. This demands that we be docile and attentive to the cry of the poor and to come to their aid.* (Pope Francis, 2013, EG, 187)

If the academic action of a university is not in the service of others, it runs the risk of creating an institution that is remote, outdated, hermetic and unaware of what is happening in the reality of thousands of men and women today. And this does not coincide with the pedagogy of Jesus, who knew how to approach the reality of his time, approach his neighbour to listen to him, accompany him, support him, dignify him and transform his life.

For this reason, we must remember that Catholic Universities,

*Included among its research activities, therefore, will be a study of serious contemporary problems in areas such as the dignity of human life, the promotion of justice for all, the quality of personal and family life, the protection of nature, the search for peace and political stability, a more just sharing in the world's resources, and a new economic and political order that will better serve the human community at a national and international level.* (John Paul II, ECE, 32).

We are invited to creatively deploy all the tools that are necessary to encourage, from the entire academic curriculum, personal and community leadership in all young students. Pope Francis writes:

*The training of leaders achieves its goal when it seeks to make the life of the university develop not only the mind but also the "heart", the conscience, together with students' practical abilities. Scientific and theoretical knowledge must be blended with the sensitivity of the scholar and researcher, so that the fruits*

*The training of leaders achieves its goal when it seeks to make the life of the university develop not only the mind but also the “heart”, the conscience, together with students’ practical abilities. Scientific and theoretical knowledge must be blended with the sensitivity of the scholar and researcher, so that the fruits of study are not acquired in a self-referential way, concerned with professional training alone, but have a relational and social end.*

*of study are not acquired in a self-referential way, concerned with professional training alone, but have a relational and social end. (Pope Francis, 2019).*

It is the task of every Catholic University to train young people to be humanly professional people, with their feet on the ground and committed in solidarity with their society.

### 3. Support to young people

Supporting young people in Higher Education is fundamental. If it is possible that students feel they are called to awaken the leader that lies within them, it is necessary that they feel accompanied, encouraged and supported, so that this leadership is truly a force that has a great impact on their lives and the place where they put it into practice.

To this end, we are going to reflect on how to cultivate support that is meaningful and transcendental for the lives of young students.

We can start by listening to students in the process they are going through in a personal way: listening to them talk about their lives, their successes, their failures, their hopes, their own uncertainties about their life project, as outlined by the 300 young people in the pre-synodal meeting in the city of Rome:

*We seek to be listened to and to not merely be spectators in society but active participants. We seek a Church that helps us find our vocation, in all of its senses. Furthermore, sadly not all of us believe sainthood is something achievable and that it is a path to happiness. We need to revitalize the sense of community that leads us to a sense of belonging. (Synod of Bishops, 2018a).*

Young people seek to be protagonists, we cannot turn a deaf ear to their voices, their thoughts. You have to create openness to hear what they want to express, without censorship and without conditioning. And so they notice—as it will describe at the end—that they are assisted with a genuine support service. As the final document of the Synod of

Bishops states:

*Accompaniment for the sake of valid, stable and well-founded choices, is therefore a service that is widely needed. Being present, supporting and accompanying the journey towards authentic choices is one way for the Church to exercise her maternal function, giving birth to the freedom of the children of God. Service of this kind is simply the continuation of the way in which the God of Jesus Christ acts towards his people: through constant and heartfelt presence, dedicated and loving closeness and tenderness without limits. (Synod of Bishops, 2018b, 91).*

Approaching students to accompany their reality is to touch “*sacred ground*” (Pope Francis, 2019a), to enter their lives requires respect, simplicity, brotherhood and tenderness. It should be remembered, as we have already said, that young students are not just another number in our universities, they are people who come to our fields loaded with stories, and we must listen to those stories, embrace them, support them and project them so that they continue to grow.

This requires developing a true institutional support plan where the role of faculty members is a key element, as well as that of the other stakeholders in the university, because accompanying students is the responsibility of the entire educational community.

As it is expressed, the action of “listening” is much more than “hearing.” “*There are those who believe that by speaking you learn to speak, when actually it is by listening that you learn to speak. Those who do not know how to listen cannot speak well*”. (Freire, 2008, p.52)<sup>63</sup>

When listening, it is done in depth and with responsibility considering what is being expressed; but, in addition, it is possible to exercise empathy and care for the person. Young students, through a conducive climate and environment, can express themselves freely and fully entrust their lives to us.

To develop a true solidarity service-learning educational process, we must invite to listen and see both the students’ reality and that of all the stakeholders who will have a role in the project.

The University must make a decisive choice in creating institutional spaces where young people find the opportunity to express themselves and talk about their own lives within their learning pathway.

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63 Own translation.

This challenges the educator to be concerned not only about the masterful development of his presentations, but also to find that healthy balance between delivering an excellent class and, at the same time, being a “counterpart” who listens, encourages and invites students to discuss. As Tapia states: “Unlike the traditional teaching model, in SL the role of teachers is more that of a counterpart than of a professor”. (Tapia, 2018, p.34).

### 3.1 The teacher as a counterpart

Among their tasks, teachers do not forget the support service. They accompany the pedagogical process as well as the vital process of students, they pay attention to everything that is happening to young undergraduates while the educational process is under way.

Clearly, we cannot be naïve. Many times, in some universities, we do not regard teachers as counterparts and the intention of this paper is certainly not to judge on that, but quite the opposite: to bring it to light so that we can reflect on the praxis, as educators who teach in an institution with Catholic identity and mission, which is called to look after people in a preferential way.

Whatever the educators creed, the supporting role is utmost important. Therefore, in the context of teaching at a Catholic University, it is important to do it naturally and with commitment, since it is in its roots and it is a fundamental part of its ideology to continue with the teachings and practices of Jesus the Teacher.

It is interesting to see how this image of Jesus the Teacher or Jesus the educator can help us awaken or rekindle, as adult educators, the action of accompanying today’s students.

This kind of support allows us to see and put into practice those methods that, even as the years go by, are always effective and necessary to accompany people in their personal and educational process.

*It should be mentioned that teachers accompanying this process are not the “heroes” of Higher Education.*

It should be mentioned that teachers accompanying this process are not the “heroes” of Higher Education. Making this clear will ensure that no greater demands will be imposed on them, nor will the opening of a way facilitate

this false and not very Christian idealism that we sometimes create in our institutions and that can be counterproductive; both for educators and for the institution itself.

The educator accompanying this process is, above all, a person, a flesh-and-blood human being, with feelings, emotions, weaknesses and strengths, but with a vocation totally at the service of teaching and caring for others. As Ángela García-Pérez and Rafael Mendía affirm:

*The counterpart as an educator (or the educator as a counterpart) is an adult who contributes with their skills and experiential background to the personal and social growth pathway of individuals and groups in the educational process. Adults contribute their constructivist criticism, their career and empathy to stimulate the group and the individual to build their own project. (García-Pérez & Mendía, 2015, p.44)<sup>64</sup>*

The educator who provides support is the one who somehow allows his humanity to be glimpsed in front of his students. He is still that adult who, with a measured and healthy distance, is interested, concerned and helps to motivate young people with his or her experience and training, to encourage them to build their own educational project. And, clearly, this support has also a great impact on the student's life project.

Professors, by supporting young students, continue their training. *"The attentive educator, the smart educator, does not learn in class but reading in people as if they were a text". (Freire, 2008, p.48)<sup>65</sup>*

Young people with admirable abilities become aware of those adult educators who are distant, who only see them as "repositories" of content and as mere listeners to a master class.

Different are those professors who, in addition to offering their wisdom and knowledge, "spend" their vocation in favour of accompanying the life process of each one of them. By providing a support service, professors inspire and motivate young students to develop social leadership in their own contexts. As García-Pérez and Mendía explain:

*It is a process that educates through the quality of the relationship: transmitting interest, enthusiasm and motivation over the shared project; living together and communicating in an environment of respect and freedom; to give the centre to those who are living their educational process from within so that they feel valued, capable and playing a relevant and transformative social role. (García-Pérez & Mendía, 2015, p.44)<sup>66</sup>*

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64 Own translation.

65 Own translation.

66 Own translation.

It is of the utmost importance that the University develops the educator's support to young students, since it allows them to feel motivated and valued. In addition, it is important for the family to see that their children are being supported by significant people in the places they attend. As the final document of the Synod of Bishops "Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment" reminds us:

*As well as family members, those called to exercise a role of accompaniment include all the significant persons in the various spheres of young people's lives, such as teachers, animators, trainers, and other figures of reference, including professional ones. (Synod of Bishops, 2018b, 93).*

The University, by exercising this support, allows the learning process to be displayed outstandingly. The curriculum, the contents, life, planning, the process, everything becomes a great framework, which values young people as a person achieving a comprehensive learning "head, heart and hands" (Pope Francis, 2015). This integrity is necessary to live a true leadership for the community.

Support, among other things, enables students to discern also their own life according to the needs of the reality of the society in which they live. The educator's support, as we have mentioned, contributes in this sense to "read the world" (Freire, 2015 p.44) and awaken a leadership in pursuit of an action that transforms that reality or realities that are being unfairly hit by different situations of oppression. The bishops, in the final document of the synod, affirm:

*Accompaniment cannot limit itself to the path of spiritual growth and to the practices of the Christian life. Equally fruitful is accompaniment along the path of gradual assumption of responsibilities within society, for example in the professional sphere or in socio-political engagement. (Synod of Bishops, 2018b, 94).*

A university that accompanies young students in their way to be protagonists and stakeholders transforming reality entails encouraging young people to see reality, especially the suffering reality of many people, and discern in the light of academic content, the Gospel, the Catholic social teaching and also the charisma of each university.

From all the above reflections, we can say that in Higher Catholic Education the role of faculty members is utmost important, as someone who walks along the pathway with every young student, so that they can feel encouraged to exercise the role of leader within themselves and put it at the service of the community.



It is always appropriate that professors of Catholic Universities, as a way to review their praxis, can give themselves the opportunity to ask two questions proposed by Prof. Dr. Arantzazu Martínez Odría:

*What opportunity do we offer our students to look at reality from other perspectives different from the most widespread in our immediate environment? What kind of reference do we represent for them, for each of our students and colleagues, when looking at the reality of the world around us?*

*What opportunity do we offer our students to look at reality from other perspectives different from the most widespread in our immediate environment? What kind of reference do we represent for them, for each of our students and colleagues, when looking at the reality of the world around us?<sup>67</sup>*

It is necessary to be able to create or revitalize spaces in our Catholic Universities to accompany those who accompany. This means, a space for faculty members to feel supported, listened to and strengthened to exercise a quality teaching practice with their students.

Let us remind ourselves that the educator who develops his vocation in our institutions is not someone who can do anything and endure everything, but someone who is also a human being who needs to be supported to continue developing his personal and professional growth.

This support is genuine and true when it is a comprehensive, careful support, and covering not only pedagogical, but also administrative, economic and, above all, spiritual areas.

The University is fruitful when it accompanies, encourages, guides, supports and lives the service. Let's keep accompanying each others.

#### **4. Towards a synodal, popular and missionary pastoral ministry**

Every campus pastoral ministry is called to develop a synodal, popular and missionary life. So that it continues to grow, strengthening its identity and its mission.

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<sup>67</sup> UNISERVITATE, (29th October de 2020), Reflections on Service-Learning in the Identity and Mission of Catholic Higher Education. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IcQ2Y8dePkl&ab\\_channel=CLAYSSDigital](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IcQ2Y8dePkl&ab_channel=CLAYSSDigital)

Young students are agents of transformation and have an active role in recreating the campus ministry, boldly and creatively carrying out proposals that integrate all the University stakeholders.

The campus pastoral ministry cannot be away or set aside from the institution, let alone minimized in it. Since it *“offers the members of the university community an opportunity to integrate religious and moral principles with their academic study and non-academic activities, thus integrating faith with life.”* (John Paul II, 1990, ECE, 38).

The pastoral ministry of each university has to work collaboratively across disciplines with all the other spaces on campus. Carrying out this would prove a true evangelizing educational project in a synodal perspective.

*The pastoral ministry of each university has to work collaboratively across disciplines with all the other spaces on campus. Carrying out this would prove a true evangelizing educational project in a synodal perspective.*

Synodality must be experienced together with the joint responsibility of young people, to think and execute the decisions made as an educational community. Since it is a synodal university pastoral ministry, it will be making a

true renewal and will be fulfilling the dream expressed by the Holy Father:

*I dream of a “missionary option”, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation.* (Pope Francis, 2013, EG, 27).

The pastoral ministry in Higher Education should work as a *“popular youth ministry”* (Pope Francis, 2019a, 230) where it develops a comprehensive proposal, so that it reaches out to all young people who attend university.

When we refer to it being popular, we are saying that it includes everyone and especially the weakest and most remote, as Father Rafael Tello tells us:

*The popular culture tends to include everyone and achieve what is good for everyone, which is why it has a universalist bias, and that desire for everyone to enjoy what is good, often leads her to adapt to the pace of the weakest.* (Tello, 2011, p.114).

The popular culture strongly breaks into the university context. The University must have the doors open not only to go out as a mission to vulnerable and impoverished young people, but it must also invite these young people to enter and be part of the university environment.

The Catholic University must facilitate that impoverished young people have the opportunity to be part of it and not just recipients of some university project. As the Holy Father reminds us: *“The Synod called for the development of a youth ministry capable of being inclusive, with room for all kinds of young people, to show that we are a Church with open doors”* (Pope Francis, ChV, 234).

For this reason, university pastoral ministry must take into account new forms of announcement, more flexible times, simple and close language, and a process in which everyone can feel invited.

As Pope Francis states:

*At times, in the attempt to develop a pure and perfect youth ministry, marked by abstract ideas, protected from the world and free of every flaw, we can turn the Gospel into a dull, meaningless and unattractive proposition. Such a youth ministry ends up completely removed from the world of young people and suited only to an elite Christian youth that sees itself as different, while living in an empty and unproductive isolation.* (Pope Francis, ChV, 232).

University pastoral ministry, to be fruitful, must carry out the action of “going forth” to meet everyone. And this can be achieved by being in a state of popular youth mission that *“breaks through our customary models and ways of thinking”* (Pope Francis, 2019a, 239).

University has to encourage the popular youth mission, supporting and encouraging it so that young students continue to create and recreate new ways of bringing the Gospel and the institution’s charisma to the entire community.

SL is, without a doubt, a great means to be able to make this popular youth mission a reality in our institutions in an effective and concrete way, since it allows us to integrate pastoral activities with academic excellence and social engagement.

Therefore, SL enriches the university pastoral ministry because, in addition to making the Gospel clear in an effective way, it manages to integrate *“science and faith, culture and spirituality, theory and practice”* (Rial, 2015). And at the same time, the university pastoral ministry provides SL with a deep sense of belonging and communion in each

*SL enriches the university pastoral ministry because, in addition to making the Gospel clear in an effective way, it manages to integrate “science and faith, culture and spirituality, theory and practice”. And at the same time, the university pastoral ministry provides SL with a deep sense of belonging and communion in each of its projects, achieving a true reflection of what God expresses to us by way of the reality in which we are.*

As the Holy Father tells us:

*Young people are greatly enriched when they overcome their reticence and dare to visit homes, and in this way make contact with people’s lives. They learn how to look beyond their family and their group of friends, and they gain a broader vision of life. At the same time, their faith and their sense of being part of the Church grow stronger. Youth missions, which usually take place during school holidays after a period of preparation, can lead to a renewed experience of faith and even serious thoughts about a vocation. (Pope Francis, ChV, 240).*

The popular youth mission will bring the Catholic University closer to other diverse areas, where they also need the presence of God the father, who goes forth to meet them, to be a companion on the road of life.

Only the university that goes forth is the one “*taking the first step, being involved and supportive, bearing fruit and rejoicing*” (Pope Francis, 2013) because it walks in communion with everyone.

## 5. Propose dreams to young people

*Young students seek in different ways the “vertigo” that makes them feel alive. So, let’s provide for it! Let’s encourage everything that really helps them transform their dreams into projects. Let us strive so that they can discover that all the potential they have is a bridge, a step towards a vocation, in the broadest and most beautiful sense of the word. Let’s propose ambitious goals, great challenges,*

of its projects, achieving a true reflection of what God expresses to us by way of the reality in which we are.

Fragmenting these two areas and not linking them (SL-Pastoral) would be a huge deficiency for our Catholic Universities and a loss for all those who are determined to carry out a true institutional evangelizing mission.

*and help them carrying out and achieving them. Let's not leave them alone and let's challenge them more than they challenge us. (Pope Francis, 2018, p.140)<sup>68</sup>.*

In the light of the Synod on Young People, SL allows us to strongly invite young students, to be protagonists of their dreams, to carry out everything they propose to do based on their personal and community goals.

*Service-Learning empowers young people's dreams of transformation and makes them come true by proposing a true process of meaningful learning and meeting with the community.*

S e r v i c e - L e a r n i n g empowers young people's dreams of transformation and makes them come true by proposing a true process of meaningful learning and meeting with the community.

The aforementioned invitation of Pope Francis: *"Let us strive so that they can discover that all the potential they have is a bridge"*, is notably expressed in SL, when Higher Education students discover that they are protagonists and observe that their solidarity action is united with that of a community that not only receives, but also shares its knowledge with them.

Service-learning never leaves young students alone, but on the contrary, it makes them experience the sense of community in a unique way, where they can visualize what educational development does when the contents are applied in concrete and real situations.

SL also makes all students—whether they come from other creeds or do not profess any belief—feel invited and summoned to be part of a dream in which all voices are heard and are necessary to share a common interest. And that common interest, as Paul Knitter states:

*It is a commitment to liberation and global responsibility, (...). Common concern for justice will provide the common context, starting point and criteria for both interreligious dialogue and fruitful cooperation. (Knitter, 2005, p.118)<sup>69</sup>.*

Service for the common good offered by young people from different beliefs is a valuable interreligious experience for students. It helps us understand that the world we live in, we are all part of a universal family and that no one should feel left out.

*(...) all those who have other visions of life, who belong to other religions or who distance themselves from religion altogether. All the young, without exception,*

68 Own translation

69 Own translation

*are in God's heart and therefore also in the Church's heart.* (Synod of Bishops, 2018b, 117).

Young people know that we live and experience social, religious, and cultural diversities and it is them who remind us that we must open ourselves to dialogue with the different parts of society in order to walk in unity. They assume the “polyhedral model” with great dedication. (Pope Francis, 2013)

SL helps us live a true Church “which goes forth” (Pope Francis, 2013), which goes to the peripheries in search of generating a culture of encounter. And young people are the first ones who want to go forth and experience that encounter; they are the ones who are willing to make the dreams of a community come true.

Young people are the ones who do not want to stay still, comfortable in their places, as José María Rodríguez Olaizola, reminds us:

*(...) We need to become aware that many young people can—and want—to have something more to say, to fight and to suggest. Yes, there are also young people in the Church looking for a place. And that place cannot be just that of someone who is sitting in a classroom, or on the benches of a temple, listening with infinite patience.* (Olaizola, 2020, p.85)<sup>70</sup>

Let us invite young people to leave their desks in our classrooms to bravely go forth to meet reality, see it, interpret it and choose new paths to help transform it. SL offers creative tools that allow to respond to this invitation through concrete facts for the benefit of a community.

Thousands of young people, facing the Covid-19 pandemic, got up and voluntarily gave their time to show solidarity with their neighbours. Like young people in Spain, who joined the campaign “*I help you with the garbage*” favouring the care of their neighbours. Or like young people in Colombia, who have organized collections in favour of neighbourhoods where the state has not arrived, and from the universities have participated in the production of protection or diagnostic material.

These two experiences are part of many others that have been collected and can be found in the “map of good practices in pandemic” on CLAYSS website.<sup>71</sup> These projects from different parts of the world show, once again, that young people are a source of hope in a context of uncertainty.

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<sup>70</sup> Own translation.

<sup>71</sup> CLAYSS, Service-learning experiences related to Covid-19 pandemic, [https://www.clayss.org.ar/CLAYSS\\_exp\\_pand\\_2020.html?fbclid=IwAR3x3gJv3lX8DENgMmumFEA2VF1cwL8uSDdoMortjF55rtrpqxtO2PYix70](https://www.clayss.org.ar/CLAYSS_exp_pand_2020.html?fbclid=IwAR3x3gJv3lX8DENgMmumFEA2VF1cwL8uSDdoMortjF55rtrpqxtO2PYix70)

It is impressive to observe how SL practice strengthens education and motivation of young people as they experience the appreciation of their solidarity actions by the community (Tapia, 2018). Let us continue to motivate and encourage young people who are already committing themselves in all parts of our global world, different gestures of solidarity in favour of the most vulnerable in our societies.

When young people discover that they can put all their skills at the service of the community, manage to feel that their life becomes truly fulfilled. In addition, they experience that their lives make sense by offering their hands to make a better world.

Let us continue encouraging students, as a Catholic University, to continue helping in vaccination projects, in community kitchens in popular neighbourhoods, in homes for the elderly or delivering virtual content on pedagogical subjects to children and adolescents of other educational levels.

May we exclaim, upon seeing these solidarity actions, the very words of the Holy Father:  
*How beautiful it is to see that young people are “street preachers” (callejeros de la fe), joyfully bringing Jesus to every street, every town square and every corner of the earth! (Pope Francis, 2013, EG, 106).*

## 6. Conclusion

The challenge of continuing to link SL with the message that the Synod on Young People has left us has still much more to contribute to the mission and identity of our Catholic Universities worldwide.

We must be willing to allow young students to play a leading role in our institutions, and to be the main stakeholders in the development of their everyday learning at the university. At the same time, invite them to live the task of joint responsibility when thinking, planning and executing actions that involve the entire university life.

By allowing this space, we will be realizing, in a concrete manner, the synodality that Pope Francis is fervently promoting and that young people are encouraged to live. As the final document of the Synod on Young People expresses to us:

*The participation of the young helped to “reawaken” synodality, which is a “constitutive element of the Church... Synodality characterizes both the life and the mission of the Church, which is the People of God formed of young and old, men and women of every culture and horizon, and the Body of Christ, in which we are*

*members one of another, beginning with those who are pushed to the margins and trampled upon. (Synod of Bishops, 2018b, 121).*

We must not deprive young students of being part of the construction and development of the institutional life. Let us ensure that they can collaborate, from a true joint responsibility, with the objectives that the University wants to propose itself, the paths that it wants to follow, the way to continue evangelizing and the possibility of being a University that walks together with the people.

Young people from our Catholic Universities around the world are prepared, we just need to make the decision to open the doors and allow a new Spirit to permeate the areas of the entire University.

Because, if we want the University to be a home for students, we should not forget the words that the Supreme Pontiff says:

*(...) to create a "home" is to create "a family". "It is to learn to feel connected to others by more than merely utilitarian and practical bonds, to be united in such a way as to feel that our life is a bit more human. To create a home is to let prophecy take flesh and make our hours and days less cold, less indifferent and anonymous. It is to create bonds by simple, everyday acts that all of us can perform. A home, as we all know, demands that everyone work together. No one can be indifferent or stand apart, since each is a stone needed to build the home. (Pope Francis, ChV, 217).*

Let us continue walking together to be able to make the dream of so many young students come true in Higher Education who every day, in person or virtually, enter our university institutions to be builders of a new society. Young people with a unique sensitivity for the pain of so many people who are unjustly expelled by the "throwaway culture". (Pope Francis, 2015, LS, 20)

Let us help them make that dream come true, with an ever-attentive listening, with a real and sustained accompaniment, with openness to dialogue and with the granting of leadership. So that they exercise a committed leadership in society and thus be able to achieve a true work for the common good.



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*Uniservitate* is a global programme for the promotion of service-learning in Catholic Higher Education. It aims to generate a systemic change in Catholic Higher Education Institutions (CHEIs), through the institutionalisation of service-learning (SL) as a tool to achieve its mission of an integral education and formation of agents of change committed to their community.

**“We will not change the world,  
if we do not change education”**

*Pope Francis*

## **2** Service-learning pedagogy and the teachings of the Catholic Church

We are pleased to present the book *Service-learning pedagogy and the teachings of the Catholic Church*, a polyhedral text, born in different parts of the world, an expression of different voices and an invitation to reflect on Higher Education in view of a greater commitment to the universal human family. Its intention is to contribute to the generation of Higher Education Institutions (university and non-university, Catholic and non-confessional) capable of networking and generating life, of learning and generating meaning in their being and from their knowledge and doing, for others and with others, and not only cloisters that live for themselves. It is a text with a plural, global and diverse perspective, which opens up dialogue and builds bridges that contribute to achieving a more fraternal society.

*Uniservitate is an initiative led by Porticus, with the general coordination of the Latin American Center for Service-learning (CLAYSS)*

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