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You Are the Now of God: *Christus Vivit* and the Need for a Theological Anthropology of Youth

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Adolescents and young adults are generally missing from Catholic theological reflection on what it means to be a human person. However, Pope Francis's 2019 Apostolic Exhortation, Christus Vivit, *reveals an operative theological anthropology of young people as inherently good and of adolescence and young adulthood as a life stage that is good in its own right. This, then, can serve as a foundation for a more robust theological consideration of adolescents and young adults in Catholic theological anthropology, in general, and in our understandings of the doctrines of the* imago Dei*, sin, and grace, in particular.*

Keywords: Catholic theology, theological anthropology, Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, youth, adolescence, young adulthood

It is good to be a young person! Pope Francis's 2019 apostolic exhortation, *Christus Vivit*, is a celebration of this often overlooked and misunderstood stage of life.[1] In this culminating document of the 2018 meeting of the Synod of Bishops, Francis calls the church and its young people into a renewed dialogue of openness, inclusivity, and welcome. To do this, Francis makes the case for us to value the goodness of young people and to name adolescence and young adulthood as stages of life that are valuable

[1] A shorter version of this article was published as Cynthia L. Cameron, "Francis' Theological Anthropology of Young Adults: *Christus Vivit* as Resource for Undergraduate Theological Educators," in *The Human in a Dehumanizing World* (College Theology Society, vol. 7), ed. Jessica Coblentz and Daniel P. Horan (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2022). I thank Orbis Books for permission to reprint and expand that material.

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in their own right. This perspective provides a challenge to Catholic theologians to include young people in our theological anthropological reflections, to think about the theological claim that young people are human beings and not merely not-yet-adults.

In addressing young people and the adults who minister with them, Francis focuses on what he terms "youth" or "young people," those sixteen to twenty-nine years of age. This is a range of ages that includes what psychologists might term mid- and late-adolescence and early young adulthood.[2] It is important to note that, although there are many developmental and experiential continuities across this age range, there are significant differences between, say, a sixteen year old and a thirty year old. Nevertheless, in this article, I follow Francis in using "young people" and "youths" as relatively fluid categories roughly synonymous with adolescence and young adulthood; I use adolescence to describe the earlier part of the age range (approximately sixteen to twenty-one) and young adulthood to mark the later part (approximately twenty-two to twenty-nine). I use the terms "child" and "children" to describe prepubescent and early-adolescent youngsters, generally those younger than fourteen years of age.

Francis's focus on this stage of life draws the attention of theologians who are interested in thinking theologically about young people. Although the purpose of this apostolic exhortation is not to lay out a finished and systematic theological anthropology of young people, it serves as a call for theologians to take up this task. This article, therefore, considers the relative insufficiency of current Catholic theological reflection on adolescence and young adulthood, draws on the insight from Karl Rahner that childhood is a life stage that is good in its own right, and investigates how Francis's *Christus Vivit* might contribute toward an argument that adolescence and young adulthood are also life stages that are inherently good. The article concludes with a sketch of what a theological anthropology that takes youth seriously might look like.

The Need for a Theological Anthropology That Considers Young People

Age discrimination or ageism is often listed alongside other forms of marginalization, such as those based on gender, race, class, and sexual

[2] Adolescence is commonly divided into several stages: early adolescence (from the onset of puberty until approximately age fourteen), mid-adolescence (approximately fourteen to seventeen), late adolescence (approximately eighteen to twenty-one), and early adulthood (approximately twenty-two to thirty). However, the dividing lines among these life stages are fuzzy and can be influenced by a variety of developmental and cultural factors; for a useful summary of this issue, see Alexa C. Curtis, "Defining Adolescence," *Journal of Adolescent and Family Health*, 7, no. 2 (October 2015), https://scholar.utc.edu/jafh/vol7/iss2/2.

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orientation; however, it is not well explored in systematic theology. This lacuna means that we do not have significant theological reflection on what it means for humans, as created by God, to age. In other words, although there is a great deal of theological reflection on what it means for humans, as created by God, to have different genders or races, there is not sufficient reflection on the category of age. Including age in our theological vision of what it means to be a human person is all the more important because age is never a stable category in a person's life. The experiences of a single human being vary as they age; being an infant, a toddler, a child, a teenager, a young adult, a middle-aged adult, and an elderly person are all quite different. And, although there is continuity of identity as that single person ages, there is significant variety in the experiences of a single human being living a natural life span, a variety not often considered by theologians seeking to describe what it means to be a human being. In addition, as theologians focusing on intersectionality remind us,[3] the unstable category of age helps draw attention to the ways that other forms of discrimination get played out in an individual's life. Because of this, some of the key questions of Catholic theological anthropology require further reflection when age is brought into the conversation. Taking this more expansive view of the human person as someone who ages can provide theologians with a more capacious and nuanced reflection on human experience.

Despite this tendency to overlook chronological age in Catholic systematic theologies, young people are not entirely absent from the wider theological literature. A great deal of the reflection on young people tends to take one of three foci: on the spiritual lives of young people; on ministry to young people; and on moral decision-making among young people. First, research into the spiritual lives and faith practices of adolescents and young adults is an important and growing body of interdisciplinary work that is helpful for understanding the contexts within which young people are living out their faith commitments. For example, Christian Smith and his colleagues have used survey data and in-depth interviews with adolescents and young adults to describe how these young people experience their religious belonging.[4] Other, more focused studies have looked at the spiritual lives of young

[3] Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, *Intersectional Theology: An Introductory Guide* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018), 13–14.

[4] Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Christian Smith with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Christian Smith with Kari Christoffersen, Hilary Davidson, and Patricia Snell Herzog, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011);

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people at the intersection of several categories of marginalization, such as age and gender or age and race.[5] Although all of these resources are important for understanding the faith lives and spiritual practices of young people, they generally do not reflect on the theological question of what it means to be a human person who is an adolescent or young adult.

Second, theological reflection on pastoral ministry with young people is another important area of research that takes age seriously. Theresa O'Keefe, for example, is a theologian and religious educator who is thinking theologically about ministry with young people. She argues that adults who work with adolescents in youth ministry, religious education, and other informal faith-based contexts are invited to form robust relationships with adolescents, guiding them toward adulthood by demonstrating and describing the skills that are necessary.[6] While O'Keefe is attentive to the challenges and opportunities presented by adolescence, her focus is on the responsibilities of the adults with whom the adolescents are in relationship rather than on the theological meaning of adolescence itself.

Finally, moral theologians are interested in the ways that young people express their moral agency and make moral choices. For example, religious educator Katherine Turpin explores the effects of consumer culture on adolescent decision-making and identity development. Jason King explores the ethical challenges faced by young people in a contemporary "hook-up" culture. And, Doris Kieser draws attention to adolescent girls in Catholic sexual ethics, raising up, in particular, the voices and experiences of adolescent girls and young women around questions of embodiment, physical maturation, and sexual behaviors.[7] Putting the experiences of young

Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[5] Dori Grinenko Baker, *Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young Women* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005); Joyce Ann Mercer, *Girl Talk, God Talk: Why Faith Matters to Teenage Girls—and Their Parents* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008); Anne Phillips, *The Faith of Girls: Children's Spirituality and Transition to Adulthood* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2011); Patrick B. Reyes, *Nobody Cries When We Die: God, Community, and Surviving to Adulthood* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2016); Almeda M. Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Evelyn L. Parker, ed., *The Sacred Selves of Adolescent Girls: Hard Stories of Race, Class, and Gender* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006).

[6] Theresa A. O'Keefe, *Navigating Toward Adulthood: A Theology of Ministry with Adolescents* (New York: Paulist Press, 2018). See also, Kenda Creasy Dean, Chap Clark, and David Rahn, eds., *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically about Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2001).

[7] Katherine Turpin, *Branded: Adolescents Converting from Consumer Faith* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006); Jason E. King, *Faith with Benefits: Hookup Culture on Catholic*

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people into conversation with moral and ethical reflection often carries assumptions of their personhood; generally, however, the focus of these works is more on the behavior of young people rather than on what it means from a systematic theological perspective to name adolescents and young adults as created by God.

When theologians do reflect on age as a relevant category for theological anthropological exploration, the tendency is to focus on younger children.[8] In the Protestant traditions, for example, practical theologians such as David Jensen, Kristin Herzog, Bonnie Miller-McLemore, and Joyce Ann Mercer each reflect on the theological meaning of childhood, which they define as including all persons up to the age of eighteen, which would include mid-adolescents (and some of the young people that Pope Francis calls us to consider).[9] From a Catholic perspective, Karl Rahner's 1963 essay, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," is the starting place for much contemporary Catholic theological reflection on childhood. In fact, Rahner calls theologians to greater reflection on childhood, suggesting that "scripture and tradition alike presuppose that we already know precisely *what* a child really is far more than they tell us explicitly or treat it as a distinct question."[10] However, scholars Todd David Whitmore and Mary Ann Hinsdale note that, for thirty years, Rahner's contribution stood somewhat alone.[11] More recently, some Catholic theologians have taken up the task of reflecting

Campuses (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Doris M. Kieser, *Catholic Sexual Theology and Adolescent Girls: Embodied Flourishing* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015).

[8] For a helpful summary of how children have been taken up by a variety of theologians from the Christian tradition, see Jerome W. Berryman, *Children and the Theologians: Clearing the Way for Grace* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2009).

[9] David H. Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability: A Theology of Childhood* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005); Kristin Herzog, *Children and Our Global Future: Theological and Social Challenges* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005); Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003); Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005). Also worth noting is David Csinos's book, which describes the theologizing of children—how they understand who God is: David M. Csinos, *Little Theologians: Children, Culture, and the Making of Theological Meaning* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2020).

[10] Karl Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 8 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1971), 40.

[11] Todd David Whitmore (with Tobias Winright), "Children: An Undeveloped Theme in Catholic Teaching," in *The Challenge of Global Stewardship: Roman Catholic Responses*, ed. Maura A. Ryan and Todd David Whitmore (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997); Mary Ann Hinsdale, "'Infinite Openness to the Infinite:' Karl Rahner's Contributions to Modern Catholic Thought on the Child," in *The Child*

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theologically on children. For example, Cristina Traina reflects on children in moral theology; Julie Hanlon Rubio considers children within the context of a theology of the family; and Jennifer Beste and Ethna Regan explore the need to include children in Catholic Social Teaching.[12]

In addition, one of the areas where those at the beginning of the life span are a center of focus in Catholic theological reflection is the consideration of unborn children. The issue of abortion is a key area of attention for Catholic moral and pastoral theologies; it is also an issue that takes developmental immaturity seriously as the church argues that adults ought not make life-and-death decisions for those who are vulnerable because of their age. Many of the church's reflections on abortion in its moral theology presume the dignity and value of the life of the unborn child. After children are born, however, their presence in our theological anthropologies is somewhat marginal and, as suggested previously, tends to focus on their spiritual development rather than on the question of their human dignity. Theological anthropologies that take a more expansive view of age will provide the church and its theologians with the theological tools to maintain the insistence on the sacredness of the life of the unborn child and expand that insistence to children, adolescents, and, indeed, all people at all life stages.

But given the importance of Rahner's essay, it is worth considering one of his key insights as we think about adolescence and young adulthood in our theological anthropologies. For Rahner, everything that can be said about the human being created by God that pertains to the adult also applies to the child. Rather than understanding childhood as merely a stage through which we must pass in order to reach the goal of adulthood, Rahner sees childhood as an essential element in the totality of human existence. He argues that childhood "is important in itself also, as a stage of man's [*sic*] personal history in which that takes place which can only take place in childhood itself, a field which bears fair flowers and ripe fruits such as can only grow in

in Christian Thought, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2001).

[12] Cristina L. H. Traina, "Children and Moral Agency," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 29, no. 2 (2009): 19–37; Cristina L. H. Traina, "Children's Situated Right to Work," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 31, no. 2 (2011): 151–67; Julie Hanlon Rubio, "Family Ethics: Beyond Sex and Controversy," *Theological Studies*, 74 (2013): 138–61; Julie Hanlon Rubio, *A Christian Theology of Marriage and Family* (New York: Paulist Press, 2003); Jennifer Beste, "The Status of Children within the Roman Catholic Church," in *Children and Childhood in American Religions* ed. Don S. Browning and Bonnie Miller-McLemore (Ithaca, NY: Rutgers University Press, 2019); Ethna Regan, "Barely Visible: The Child in Catholic Social Teaching," *Heythrop Journal* 55, no. 6 (2014): 1021–32. See also Mary M. Doyle Roche, *Schools of Solidarity: Families and Catholic Social Teaching* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015).

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this field and in no other, and which will themselves be carried into the storehouses of eternity."[13] However, even though there are these aspects of human development that can only happen in childhood, Rahner is careful to say that childhood is graced in itself and not just as precursor to adulthood.

> The special character of childhood may always be fading away so far as *we* are concerned, and may also disappear into that which comes afterwards in point of time, so that it seems only to derive its justification and its value from this, but this is not so. *This* morning does not derive its life simply from the afternoon which follows. This playtime with its beauty is not important simply as a prelude to life as lived in full earnest. It is unique. It has a value in itself (admittedly precisely as that which contributes unreservedly to that which is to come). It is precious not merely because it seeks the riches of life in its maturity. The strange and wonderful flowers of childhood are already fruits in themselves, and do not merely rely for their justification on the fruit that is to come afterwards. The grace of childhood is not merely the pledge of the grace of adulthood.... The fact that it contributes to the later stages of life is not the sole criterion of its own intrinsic rightness. It must be the case that childhood is valuable in itself, that it is to be discovered anew in the ineffable future which is coming to meet us.[14]

As we seek to construct a theological anthropology that considers adolescence and young adulthood, we need to attend to Rahner's concern that childhood is a life stage that is valuable in its own right. Similarly, adolescence and young adulthood are valuable because there are developmental tasks that can take place only during these life stages; at the same time, this is a time that is graced by God with its own "intrinsic rightness" and not merely as a waystation on the way to adulthood.

In addition, David Jensen's book, *Graced Vulnerability*, is particularly helpful for naming some of the challenges of speaking theologically about children, challenges that apply also to speaking theologically about adolescents and young adults. Like Rahner, Jensen argues that any theology of childhood has to consider children as they currently are rather than as future adults.[15] Because our theological anthropologies tend to assume that the person under consideration is a middle-aged adult, we can lose sight of the full humanity of children and young people. In other words, the child or the adolescent or the young adult is already a fully human person, not on their way toward becoming a fully human person; every life stage is fully representative of what it means to be a human created in the image of God.

[13] Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," 36.
[14] Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," 36–37.
[15] Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*, 44.

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Jensen is also helpful in naming another problem that arises when childhood is considered in theological anthropology: not only do theological anthropologies tend to assume a middle-aged adult as the model for a human person, those who are writing those theological anthropologies are themselves middle-aged adults. In fact, they are most often white, male, cisgender, middle-class, middle-aged adults who work in the academy. The centering of adult developmental capabilities—the ability to think rationally, to form and maintain healthy relationships, to be critically reflective on one's own experiences—reflects the lived realities and experiences of adults. As Jensen puts it: "The problem becomes even more acute once we recognize that those who typically define and assign difference tend to be those in power. Children, presumably, have little say in defining what a child is … To understand children in God's image, moreover, is to reject the multiple attempts to mold children in *our* image."[16] In other words, because the theologians reflecting on childhood are adults, we run the risk of defining children and childhood through the lens of adulthood and of being inattentive to the power dynamics involved in using that lens of adulthood as we theologize about what it means for a child to be created in the image of God. Jensen's caution carries over into considerations of adolescents and young adults in theological anthropology; our theological reflections run the risk of reflecting the experiences of middle-aged adults and not those of young people. Theologians would be rightly critical of a theological anthropology of women that was written by men or a theological anthropology of Black women that was written by white women. Should we not also be skeptical of a theological anthropology of childhood or adolescence that is written by middle-aged adults?

On the other hand, by virtue of their immaturity, young people have not yet developed the cognitive skills that would enable them to participate in the construction of a theological anthropology of children or adolescents and young adults. For example, reflection on the experience of grace requires an ability to think about abstractions and relationships among abstractions that is just not yet possible for children (and even some adults). This is not to say that children do not experience grace, rather that they are not yet capable of making meaning of those experiences and articulating them in the ways that would contribute to formal academic theological conversation.[17] In other words, although they can theologize (thinking and speaking

[16] Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*, 42–43.

[17] Developmental psychologist Robert Kegan describes this as cross-categorical meaning making—the ability to see objects, people, and ideas as distinct from myself and, even more crucially, to see the connections among those objects, people, and ideas. This is

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of the things of God) and can describe their experiences of God, children and adolescents are overlooked in our theological reflection in part because they are not yet developmentally able to provide meaningful reflection on their own experiences of their childhood or adolescence in the language and style used by the academy.[18]

Although Jensen does recognize the significant challenge of writing theology for and about a group of people to which one no longer belongs, he does claim that there is a way forward. Because we are in relationship with children, we can speak authentically for children who are not yet capable of speaking for themselves.[19] The challenge then for including a consideration of adolescence and young adulthood in our theological anthropologies is whether having passed through these life stages ourselves and being currently in a variety of formal ministerial relationships and informal friendships with young people gives us a sufficient glimpse at their experiences of their own humanity. Perhaps this, combined with dialogue with young people themselves, can provide theologians with a sure enough footing for constructing a theological anthropology of adolescence and young adulthood that is adequate and affirming of these young people.

The Contributions of *Christus Vivit* for a Theological Anthropology of Youth

In January 2017, Pope Francis announced that the focus of the 2018 Synod of Bishops[20] would be "young people, the faith, and vocational discernment." His stated hope for the synod was that it would be an opportunity to build a better world, in collaboration with young people, to whom the church was committed to listening: "The Church … wishes to listen to your voice, your sensitivities, and your faith; even your doubts and your criticism. Make your voice heard,

an ability that typically develops later in adolescence or young adulthood. See Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

[18] Religious educators and pastoral ministers who work with children and adolescents also make the point that, while young people might not yet be able to contribute to the formal theological conversation in the ways that are expected by academic theologians, this formal theological discourse is not the only way of doing theology. As David Csinos reminds us, "Children are not simply passive consumers of theology; they actively generate theological meaning for themselves"; Csinos, *Little Theologians*, 3.

[19] Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*, xiv.

[20] For a review of the history and purpose of the Synod of Bishops, see Thomas J. Reese, *Inside the Vatican: The Politics and Organization of the Catholic Church* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 34–40.

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let it resonate in communities and let it be heard by your shepherds of souls."[21] Having named the topic for consideration, the Synod of Bishops released a document that outlined the meeting's preparatory consultations:

> By listening to young people, the Church will once again hear the Lord speaking in today's world. As in the days of Samuel and Jeremiah, young people know how to discern the signs of the times, indicated by the Spirit. Listening to their aspirations, the Church can glimpse the world which lies ahead and the paths the Church is called to follow.[22]

In order to include the voices of young people in a consultative process, the bishops disseminated a survey to all dioceses in the church; in addition, in March 2018, a pre-synodal gathering of three hundred young people provided an opportunity for further input from these young people.[23] After the Synod of Bishops met in October of 2018, a final document was forwarded to the pope, who then published *Christus Vivit* in the fall of 2019. As is typical, this apostolic exhortation, as the name suggests, is exhortatory in nature and does not define new doctrine or discipline for the church.[24]

Christus Vivit's publication represents the first time that a document authored by a pope has specifically addressed young people as young people. More typically, Vatican documents are addressed to adults and are concerned with young people as students in Catholic schools or youth ministry programs or as members of families.[25] In itself, it is not surprising that

[21] Pope Francis, "Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to Young People On the Occasion of the Presentation of the Preparatory Document of the 15th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops," January 13. 2017, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2017/documents/papa-francesco_20170113_lettera-giovani-doc-sinodo.html.

[22] Synod of Bishops, "Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment: Preparatory Document," January 13. 2017, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2017/documents/papa-francesco_20170113_lettera-giovani-doc-sinodo.html.

[23] Synod of Bishops, "Presentation of the Pre-Synodal Meeting," http://secretariat.synod.va/content/synod2018/en/pre-synodal-meeting.html. For good resources about the preparation for this Synod of Bishops, see "What You Need to Know About the 2018 Synod on Young People," *America Magazine*, October 3, 2018, https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/10/04/what-you-need-know-about-2018-synod-young-people.

[24] Reese, *Inside the Vatican*, 58–60.

[25] For documents pertaining to Catholic schools, see, for example, Second Vatican Council, *Gravissimum Educationis* (*Declaration on Christian Education*), 1965; Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School*, 1977; *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, 1997; *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witness to Faith*, 1982; *Educating Together in Catholic Schools: A Shared Mission Between Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful*, 2007; *The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue*, 2022. On youth ministry, see USCCB, *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1997). On families, see Pope John Paul II,

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the church has no other documents addressing the lives of young people. Generally, Vatican documents are addressed to very broad audiences, usually understood as bishops and diocesan personnel, parish priests and pastoral staff, schools and teachers, and other Catholic ordained and lay ministers; and, generally, church documents are designed to be relevant for a church that spans generations, cultures, nations, and more. Hence, they tend to have a broad focus and audience and to address significant and large-scale topics.

Unlike most other official documents, however, this document is addressed specifically and first "to all Christian young people"; it is secondarily addressed to "the entire People of God, pastors and faithful alike, since all of us are challenged and urged to reflect both on the young and for the young."[26] Francis identifies the purpose of *Christus Vivit* as a summary of the key ideas that surfaced in the synod's meetings and final document (*CV*, 4). Throughout *Christus Vivit*, Francis quotes extensively from the final document and includes the voices of some of the young people who participated in the pre-synodal gathering. So, although the pope did not himself engage with the young people that he addresses or whose voices he includes, the document is unique in that it does read as a collaboration among the pope, the Synod of Bishops, and the young people who came to Rome to share their experiences and ideas.

Because its focus is on young people, the tone of *Christus Vivit* is joyful, hopeful, and, at times, even playful.[27] Throughout the exhortation, Francis seeks to acknowledge the realities of life and faith for young people and to lift up their voices. He wants to build on the experience of the synod, which brought together people from across generations to create a culture of dialogue. Not just between young people and an ancient church, Francis sees value in dialogue among young people, between ministers and those—particularly youth—who they minister to, between contemporary believers and the biblical witness, between believers and the saints of the church,

Familiaris Consortio (*On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World*), 1981; Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (*The Joy of Love*), 2016; USCCB, *Follow the Way of Love* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1994).

[26] Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit: To Young People and to the Entire People of God* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 2019), 3. Hereafter, references to this document will be cited in text and abbreviated *CV*; citations will refer to paragraph number.

[27] As Mary Roche notes: *Christus Vivit* "is a celebration of young people and a call for them to embrace their faith, restlessness, and roles in the church and world … Francis exclaims, 'Make a ruckus!'" Mary M. Doyle Roche, "Cultivating Resistance: Youth Protest and the Common Good," in *Sex, Love, and Families: Catholic Perspectives*, ed. Jason King and Julie Hanlon Rubio (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021), 260.

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and particularly among people of different generations and experiences. Francis develops this theme of dialogue further in his 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, in which he defines dialogue as "approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground," and he calls for "dialogue between generations; dialogue among our people, for we are that people; readiness to give and receive, while remaining open to the truth."[28] But, here in *Christus Vivit*, Francis focuses more tightly on the need for a dialogical church that is welcoming of, inclusive of, and listening to its young people.

Of particular importance in *Christus Vivit* is Francis's awareness and descriptions of the lived realities of youth. Reflecting his concern for them, Francis notes that the category "young people" is a heterogeneous group, with a wide variety of life experiences, and he seeks to name some of the many challenges faced by young people around the world: experiences of violence and exploitation, marginalization and exclusion; the seductiveness of digital media; experience of young migrants; and the abuse of young people by members of the clergy (*CV*, 71–102). In the face of these challenges, however, Francis emphasizes a call to joy, personal agency, and human flourishing:

> Don't let them rob you of home and joy, or drug you into becoming a slave to their interests. Dare to be more, because who you are is more important than any possession. What good are possessions or appearances? You can become what God your Creator knows you are, if only you realize that you are called to something greater. (*CV*, 107)

Throughout the exhortation, Francis's wish for young people to bring their whole selves into the church and into their relationships with God is apparent. As a conclusion to the document, Francis names his hope for them:

> Dear young people, my joyful hope is to see you keep running the race before you, outstripping all those who are slow or fearful. Keep running, "attracted by the face of Christ, whom we love so much, whom we adore in the Holy Eucharist and acknowledge in the flesh of our suffering brothers and sisters. May the Holy Spirit urge you on as you run this race. The Church needs your momentum, your intuitions, your faith. We need them! And when you arrive where we have not yet reached, have the patience to wait for us." (*CV*, 299)[29]

[28] Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 2020), 198–199.

[29] Pope Francis is quoting his "Prayer Vigil with Young Italians at the Circus Maximus in Rome (August 11, 2018)," *L'Osservatore Romano* (August 13–14, 2018): 6.

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Given the importance and uniqueness of *Christus Vivit* as a document addressed to and concerning young people, it is worth asking how it might call us to a more robust Catholic theological anthropology of young people. Before investigating what the document offers to theologians, however, we need to acknowledge its limitations; I draw attention to three. The first is that Francis is not breaking new theological ground with this apostolic exhortation. He is echoing the rich Catholic theological reflection on relationality and human flourishing as ways of thinking about the value of the human person.[30] Second, it is important to keep in mind that this document is an exhortation and its function is, therefore, to be exhortatory—to encourage new excitement and new relationships, to call people to action, to "rally the troops." As such, the document tends to paint a picture of the relationship between young people and the church in rosy ways.

A final weakness in the document is also one that has the potential to limit its reception by the same young people that Francis is reaching out to. Because Francis is speaking to at least three audiences—young people, those who minister to them, and the whole church—there is an awkwardness to the document. Francis is often switching back and forth between addressing young people themselves and a clearly adult audience. This has the effect of implying that the young people are not fully a part of a conversation about them. This is compounded by the fact that the experiences of young people, when they are present, are mediated through the synod's final document. In other words, when Francis talks about listening to young people, he is reflecting on voices relayed to him by the bishops, who were themselves relying primarily on surveys, conversations with those who minister to young people, and the contributions of the three hundred youth who attended the pre-synodal gathering. Alongside of this is a sense of Francis speaking to young people in much the same way as the ancient sage spoke to the young men in the Book of Proverbs. Like Proverbs, it is the advice of an older adult for a young person who has very little direct voice in the document. All of this seems to somewhat undercut Francis's message that adolescence and young adulthood are life stages that are in themselves valuable and that young people have a voice and a role in the church.

[30] See, for example, Rosemary P. Carbine, "The Relational Turn in Theological Anthropology," in *T&T Clark Handbook of Theological Anthropology*, ed. Mary Ann Hinsdale and Stephen Okey (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2020); Marc Cortez, "The Madness in Our Method: Christology as the Necessary Starting Point for Theological Anthropology," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Theological Anthropology*, ed. Joshua R. Farris and Charles Taliaferro (New York: Routledge, 2016); M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010).

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Even taking these limitations into account, Francis's focus on young people in *Christus Vivit* is helpful for theologians who want to develop a more robust theological anthropology that takes youth seriously. In particular, what makes *Christus Vivit* helpful is Francis's insistence, echoing the claim made by Rahner, that adolescence and young adulthood is a life stage that is good in itself and is not merely a stepping stone to the good of adulthood. He is seeking a way to describe youth and youthfulness as part of the human experience without prescribing how it ought to be experienced by any individual young person. As we consider some of the theological anthropological commitments that can serve us in creating a more capacious theological reflection on adolescents and young adults, several key themes of the document come to the fore. In what follows, I want to draw attention to three themes that Francis develops.

First, Francis's vision of young people is profoundly rooted in his Christology, particularly his understanding of the importance of friendship with Jesus. God's overflowing love for humanity is embodied in Jesus. Francis puts it this way: "The very first truth I would tell each of you is this: 'God loves you.' It makes no difference whether you have already heard it or not. I want to remind you of it. God loves you. Never doubt this, whatever may happen to you in life. At every moment you are infinitely loved" (*CV*, 112). Jesus's death and resurrection mean that his friendship, and indeed friendship with God, is always offered, along with life, joy, and hope. "Alive, [Jesus] can be present in your life at every moment, to fill it with light and to take away all sorrow and solitude.... Because he did not only come in the past, but he comes to you today and every day, inviting you to set out towards ever new horizons" (*CV*, 125).

Francis sees an intimate connection between the youthfulness of Jesus and the youthfulness of young people. The fact that Jesus died while still what we might call a young adult provides a foundation for relationship between Jesus and each young person that can develop into a profound friendship. After arguing in chapter 2 of the exhortation that Jesus is both young and youthful, Francis invites young people to seek out a friendship with this youthful Jesus, arguing that this friendship can provide meaning and grounding to life. Francis argues that "No matter how much you live the experience of these years of your youth, you will never know their deepest and fullest meaning unless you encounter each day your best friend, the friend who is Jesus" (*CV*, 150). Francis recognizes that adolescents and young adults tend to prize the formation and maintenance of friendships and intimate relationships during this stage in their lives, and he grounds an invitation to respond to God's love in the experience of friendship with Jesus. This is, he suggests, a never-ending relationship that provides constancy, reliability, and confidence for the future.

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Second, the full flourishing of young people—and, indeed, of all people—is a hallmark of Francis's operative theological anthropology as revealed in *Christus Vivit*. In advocating for human flourishing, he is realistic about the challenges and hardships faced by many young people around the world; among these, he names war, exploitation, marginalization, exclusion based on religious, ethnic, and economic status, and the commercialization of youthfulness. In particular, Francis focuses on the challenges posed by digital media, migration, and abuse as significantly detrimental to the lives and well-being of young people. Digital media may provide new public spheres of engagement and new tools of communication; at the same time, they have also created an increasingly "digitalized culture that has had a profound impact on ideas of time and space, on our self-understanding, our understanding of others and the world, and our ability to communicate, learn, be informed and enter into relationship with others" (*CV*, 86). Francis is particularly concerned with the potential dehumanization of young people that can happen in the digital environment. Similarly, Francis is concerned with the physical dangers and potential dehumanization faced by young people who are migrants. Young people—along with their families, which include children, middle-aged adults, and older people—are fleeing war, oppression, and poverty; they populate refugee camps and often suffer from discrimination and a lack of opportunity in host countries. Reminding us of our shared humanity, Francis calls young people to remember that we each have "the same inalienable dignity as every other human being" (*CV*, 94). Lastly, Francis sees abuse as an important concern for young people, and he laments the situations of violence and abuse at the hands of those in authority that many young people experience. He draws particular attention to the evil of the sexual abuse of minors perpetrated by clergy and religious in the Catholic Church, and he says that the anger of young people reflects the anger of God (*CV*, 96).

While realistic about the many difficult challenges faced by young people, Francis does insist that God is calling all people, and particularly youth, to a life of flourishing and thriving. He says, God, "who loves you, wants you to be happy" (*CV*, 145). In discussing flourishing for young people, Francis suggests that God desires that all humans be able to live a life that brings contentment, satisfaction, and well-being, anthropological categories that theologians have taken up. In particular, Francis argues that this loving God is calling young people to live life fully:

> You have to discover who you are and develop your own way of being holy, whatever others may say or think. Becoming a saint means becoming more fully yourself, becoming what the Lord wished to dream and create, and

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> not a photocopy [of someone else]. Your life ought to be a prophetic stimulus to others and leave a mark on this world, the unique mark that only you can leave. (*CV*, 162)

Francis names fraternal relationships[31] and service to the world as ways that young people can find this flourishing life. Already oriented toward the formation of friendships, Francis invites young people to a communal life, recognizing the beauty and dignity of others, seeking their thriving. In this way, the bonds of friendship draw us outside of ourselves; Francis says:

> God loves the joy of young people. He wants them especially to share in the joy of fraternal communion, the sublime joy felt by those who share with others.... Fraternal love multiplies our ability to experience joy, since it makes us rejoice in the good of others.... May your youthful spontaneity increasingly find expression in fraternal love and a constant readiness to forgive, to be generous, and to build community. (*CV*, 167)

A particularly important part of flourishing, for Francis, is service to the world; he suggests that young people can find great satisfaction and joy in service that is oriented toward solidarity with others, particularly the poor and marginalized. He commends the various ways that young people already commit themselves to the service of others—assisting the poor, working to end environmental degradation, fighting against oppression and marginalization. He calls them to continue these efforts to make the world a better place and "to offer a Christian response to the social and political troubles emerging in different parts of the world" (*CV*, 174). In these ways, young people are witnessing to a way of life that is full of joy, a sense of purpose, and love. For Francis, this flourishing young person, who is oriented toward relationship and community, is one who is living the "*now* of God."

Finally, and most importantly, Francis is arguing that young people are not merely immature, "not-yet-adults." And it is here that the exhortatory nature of *Christus Vivit* is most helpful as Francis seeks to inspire youth and those who work with them. Certainly, he acknowledges that "youth is not something to be analyzed in the abstract. Indeed, 'youth' does not exist: there exist only

[31] It is beyond the scope of this article to put *Christus Vivit* and *Fratelli Tutti* into conversation with each other around this question of the role of fraternal friendship in Francis's theological reflections on young people, but these two documents clearly demonstrate the pope's orientation toward relationality in his operative theological anthropology, Christology, and ecclesiology.

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young people, each with the reality of his or her own life" (*CV*, 71). Being a young person is more than simply being in a period of transition between childhood and adulthood; it is a distinguishable life stage that is different from both of these. In fact, for Francis, youth is a time of special grace:

> God is the giver of youth and he is at work in the life of each young person. Youth is a blessed time for the young and a grace for the Church and for the world. It is joy, a song of home and a blessing. Making the most of our youthful years entails seeing this season of life as worthwhile in itself, and not simply as a brief prelude to adulthood. (*CV*, 135)

So, although Francis is very aware that adolescence and young adulthood are experienced by young people as a stage of life that is oriented toward a future adulthood, he wants to insist that it is an important stage of life, during which young people are both learning from and contributing to the world around them.

At the same time, for Francis, the greatest gift of adolescence and young adulthood is a hopefulness and a future orientation that seems characteristic of many young people. He calls on young people to dream big dreams and to look to the future with hope and joy. He says:

> Youth, as a phase in the development of the personality, is marked by dreams which gather momentum, by relationships which acquire more and more consistency and balance, by trials and experiments, and by choices which gradually build a life project. At this stage in life, the young are called to move forward without cutting themselves off from their roots, to build autonomy but not in solitude.... Sometime ago, a friend asked me what I see in a young person. My response was that "I see someone who is searching for his or her own path, who wants to fly on their two feet, who faces the world and looks at the horizon with eyes full of the future, full of hope as well as illusions.... To talk about young people is to talk about joy." (*CV*, 137, 139)

Although Francis understands adolescence and young adulthood as oriented toward the future, this is not because being an adult is somehow better than or more to be valued than being young. Rather, it is the very future orientation that makes being a young person valuable in its own right. These are the graces and blessings that young people bring to the church and the world: to be future-oriented, to be hopeful, to be oriented toward building relationships, and to dream big dreams. Francis is not only asserting the full humanity of young people; he is exhorting them to live into this reality and to embrace the graces of this stage of life.

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Next Steps Toward a Theological Anthropology That Considers Young People

Francis's perspective on young people as articulated in *Christus Vivit* provides us with some clear signposts for systematic theologians to consider in the construction of a more capacious theological anthropology that seriously considers age, in general, and young people, in particular. In this final section, I want to sketch out some preliminary thoughts about the directions that such a theological anthropology of young people may take. Here, I am reminded of Rahner's assertion that everything about what it means to be a human person that pertains to the adult also applies to the child. So, what the church says about its understanding of the nature of the human person should apply to young people and what we know about young people should appear in our theological reflections on the human person. In this section, therefore, I want to take up three of the traditional categories of theological anthropology—creation in the image of God, sin, and grace—and, inspired by Francis's centering of young people, consider ways that these can be expanded when we bring adolescence and young adulthood into our theological view.

Young People Are Created in the Image of God

The *imago Dei* doctrine, which claims that God created humanity in God's own image and likeness, has formed the backbone of much theological anthropological reflection.[32] In this doctrine, derived from Genesis 1:26-27, we claim that human beings are created by God to be "like" God in some way. For nearly two thousand years, Christian theologians have puzzled over what it is in humanity that is "like" God.[33] For much of that tradition, theologians—most influentially Augustine and Thomas Aquinas—have located the image of God in the human person in our rationality, in our ability to think and reason.[34] Feminist theologians and theologians of color

[32] For an excellent introduction to the *imago Dei* doctrine and the way it has been taken up by theologians, see Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image: An Introduction to Feminist Theological Anthropology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007).

[33] The church's tradition has also used the *imago Dei* doctrine to describe the unity of body and soul in the human person. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1994), 364.

[34] Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John Hammond Taylor, SJ (New York: Paulist, 1982), book 3, ch. 19, and book 12, ch. 7: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (2017), question 92, articles 1 and 4, https://www.newadvent.org/summa/2092.htm, and question 93, article 4, https://www.newadvent.org/summa/2093.htm. See Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image*, 36–47.

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have rightly noted that rooting the *imago Dei* in human rationality has been used as a way to exclude women and people of color from being considered fully imaging God.[35] Similarly, theologians who take childhood seriously insist that the *imago Dei* does not reside in any one human quality. In fact, children remind us that rationality cannot be the sole locus of the *imago Dei*; children, like people with developmental delays, mental illness, or dementia, show us that imaging God cannot be dependent on how well we reason.[36]

The insights of feminist theologians, theologians of color, and theologians considering childhood reveal a tension that exists in theological reflection on this doctrine: theologians want to affirm that the *imago Dei* remains a constant in each individual throughout the life span;[37] at the same time, we need to affirm that humans do not express the *imago Dei* in the same way at each stage in their lives. Theologians who consider childhood also importantly remind us that being created by God in the image of God is not something that we attain at adulthood. One does not grow into one's imaging of God, it is not something that develops in us, nor is it something that could decline as we age.

Evangelical theologian John Kilner makes the important point that it is not particular human qualities that determine our status as *imago Dei*; rather, being in the image of God is a statement about the whole person and about humanity as a whole.[38] He bases this on the Genesis 1 account of the creation of humanity—that it is a story of the creation of humanity and not a story of the creation of a particular human.[39] This allows us to keep both individual persons and humanity as a whole in view as we consider the image of God. As Kilner asserts:

> Thus, referring to particular people as being God's image is legitimate; but that is always in the context of—and never separate from—their identity as (members of) humanity. Speaking of all humanity as created in God's image is legitimate as well; but that is inclusive of—not to the exclusion of—particular human beings.[40]

[35] Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image*, 85–86.

[36] Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*, 31–33.

[37] Mary Catherine Hilkert, "*Imago Dei*: Does the Symbol Have a Future," *Santa Clara Lecture* 8, no. 3 (April 14, 2002): 9. "The religious symbol of the human person as 'created in the image of God' has traditionally functioned as a root metaphor for the Christian understanding of the human person, the religious way of grounding the inviolability of human dignity, and the basis for defining the human rights of all persons."

[38] John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2015), 95.

[39] Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 85.

[40] Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 87–88.

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So, when we speak of the *imago Dei* doctrine, it is important to remember that we are talking about both individual persons who are created in the image of God and about humanity in general. This also means that, although each person reflects something of the image of God in their life, the totality of what it means to be created in the image of God can come into view only when we look to all of humanity.[41]

As we consider young people in light of Pope Francis's insights for a theological anthropology of youth, this means that we cannot exclude them from any understanding of the *imago Dei* symbol. In fact, we must include them in our understandings of the *imago Dei* symbol if we want the symbol to function more adequately as a descriptor of what it means to be human. Following Kilner's argument, when we say that adolescents and young adults are created in the image of God, we have to have both real individual young people and all of humanity in mind. Therefore, even though adolescents and young adults are still developing in their abilities to think rationally or relate to others or to make moral decisions, because they are human, they are already fully participating in the *imago Dei*.

Young People Sin

Interestingly, the church's tradition of reflection on sin is one of the few places where age has been taken seriously by theologians. In particular, theologians in the tradition have debated the relative sinfulness of children and the age at which children can be held responsible for their personal sins. Augustine, for example, believed that, because of original sin, even infants are born sinful and demonstrate sinful tendencies, even if their ability to actually sin is limited due to their physical immaturity.[42] Lutheran theologian Marcia Bunge also discusses this tendency:

[41] The fullness of what it means to be created in the image of God is also available to us in the person of Jesus Christ (Col. 1:15); a fuller exploration of the dynamic of the relationship between the *imago Dei* and the *imago Christi* is beyond the scope of this article. For a helpful interpretation of these, see Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 10th anniversary edition (New York: Herder and Herder, 1992), 69–75.

[42] Martha Ellen Stortz, "'Where or When Was Your Servant Innocent?' Augustine on Childhood," in *The Child in Christian Thought* ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), 79. As Roger Haight reminds us, however, Augustine's theology of sin is dependent on his understanding of Christ's universal offer of salvation: "If all are not sinners, then Christ is not the Savior of all. But this conviction was indeed radical; it knew no exceptions; it applied even to infants"; Roger Haight, "Sin and Grace," in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, ed. Francis Schussler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 390.

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> [The] Christian tradition often describes children as sinful creatures and moral agents. "The whole nature" of children, Calvin says, is a "seed of sin; thus it cannot be but hateful and abominable to God." Johann Arndt claims that within children lies hidden "an evil root" of a poisonous tree and "an evil seed of the serpent." Jonathan Edwards writes that as innocent as even infants appear to be, "if they are out of Christ, they are not so in God's sight, but are young vipers, and are infinitely more hateful than vipers."[43]

And, as Bunge points out, this focus on the inherent sinfulness of children has played a part in the abuse of children; when children are "vipers," they must be "broken" with harsh punishments, providing a theological justification for the emotional and physical abuse of children.[44] Nevertheless, although views of sin that lead to the abuse of children are unacceptable, the idea of children as sinners holds some important truths to be considered as we think about adolescents and young adults. Bunge suggests three aspects of theological reflection on the sinfulness of children that are worth carrying forward: that children are born into a broken and sinful world; that children do commit actual sins, although their level of accountability for those sins is lessened; and that children need nurture and formation to develop into healthy adults.[45]

As we think about the implications of these reflections on sin and children, we also need to be attentive to the cultural forces at work shaping how contemporary Western culture views adolescents and young adults. Although many psychologists and sociologists have noted the ways in which contemporary life seems, for example, to treat young people as consumers[46] and to isolate them from traditional structures of support,[47] there is also a tendency

[43] Marcia J. Bunge, "A More Vibrant Theology of Children," *Christian Reflection: A Series of Faith and Ethics* (Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2003), 14, https://www.baylor.edu/ifl/christianreflection/ChildrenarticleBunge.pdf. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1536 Edition*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1975), 97; Johann Arndt, *True Christianity*, trans. Peter Erb (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 34–35; Jonathan Edwards, "Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival (1742)," in *The Great Awakening*, ed. C. C. Goen (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 394.

[44] Edwards, "Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival (1742)," 15.

[45] Edwards, "Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival (1742)," 15–16. See also Jennifer Beste, "Children Speak: Catholic Second Graders' Agency and Experiences in the Sacrament of Reconciliation," *Sociology of Religion* 72, no. 3 (2011): 346–47.

[46] See, for example, Murray Milner, *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids: Teenagers in an Era of Consumerism, Standardized Tests, and Social Media* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2015).

[47] See, for example, Robert Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), and Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011).

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to treat young people as problems to be solved, to think about how young people need to be corralled, controlled, and contained, and to see them as untrustworthy and, therefore, as potentially dangerous. Psychologist Richard Lerner describes this as a deficit model of understanding young people. Rather than focusing on the gifts that young people bring, our institutions, policies, and practices with young people are often aimed at fixing or preventing problems, ensuring that young people do not do "bad" things.[48] Instead of valuing them for the unique individuals that they are, the focus of theological and pastoral attention tends to be on what is going wrong with them, on the mistakes they make, and on the sins they commit.

Keeping this deficit perspective in mind, it is helpful to look at the question of sin among young people through the three lenses that Bunge offered in relation to children. First, young people live in a broken world; social sin and systemic injustice shape their lives in profound ways, as they do for all. As discussed previously, Francis notes that young people face significant oppressive challenges, and, although he names some of these, he does not deal with other important systemic sins such as racism, sexism, and classism. The intersection of age with other forms of oppression means that young people can be particularly impacted by systemic injustices. For example, the disproportionate policing and incarceration of Black males takes on additional urgency when we look at Black adolescents and young adults; similarly, the modern slave trade impacts many sexually vulnerable groups, among them girls and young women. These and a whole host of systemic injustices have deformed the world in which these young people live and young people are formed as members of society by these sinful systemic forces.

Second, young people commit sins themselves and should be held accountable for these sinful acts; however, as with children, the level of accountability needs to be tied to the developmental capabilities of young people.[49] Adolescents and young adults are certainly capable of making choices that harm themselves and their relationships with others. Because they live in a broken world and are as likely as anyone else to act in selfish

[48] Richard M. Lerner, *The Good Teen: Rescuing Adolescence from the Myths of the Storm and Stress Years* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007), 6. See also Richard M. Lerner, *Liberty: Thriving and Civic Engagement Among America's Youth* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004), 2–3.

[49] It is important to note that, while developmental status may influence how we assign culpability, children do describe a sense of agency in their understandings of sin, forgiveness, and the sacrament of reconciliation. This perspective on the developing ability to act and to be held accountable for sins committed in childhood should be carried forward into our understandings of adolescence and young adulthood. See Beste, "Children Speak," 337–40.

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ways, they fail to love their neighbors or to act justly. Young people ought to be held accountable for the times that they do so, although, as with children, we need to allow for differing levels of accountability for personal sins committed in a context of systemic injustice and varying developmental capabilities. For example, the tendency to treat young violent offenders as adults in the criminal justice system make it seem as if society is taking a "tough on crime" approach; however, this trend of treating even early adolescents as adults does not take account of their cognitive development or the effect that being an adolescent in an adult prison population might have on the young offender.

And, third, young people need formation in the faith and moral decision-making. In some ways this task is even more urgent for adolescents and young adults than it is for children because of the nature of the moral choices that these young people face. Questions of sexual morality, participation in the global economy, and political participation are more significant questions for young people than they are for children. And yet our parish faith formation programs tend to end in late childhood or early adolescence.[50] This means that young people are trying to make their way in a world of complex moral and justice issues equipped only with the moral formation appropriate for a child. Ongoing faith and moral formation might not need to take the form of formal catechetical programs for young people because these are unlikely to appeal to an adolescent or young adult; however, robust faith formation ought to be a priority for the church for all people, including young people. Instead, religious educator Theresa O'Keefe advocates for "robust relationships" between adults and young people; these are deeply caring relationships in which adults invite young people into their lives and narrate for these young people the core beliefs that guide that adult's choices in life.[51] In the context of these robust relationships, young people can hear the wisdom that the church can offer them as they struggle with these significant moral choices and the impact of sin in their own lives.

As we seek a more robust theological anthropology of young people, rooted in Francis's vision in *Christus Vivit*, the category of sin requires particular attention. As Francis suggests, young people are at particular risk to the effects of a sinful world. And including young people (as well as children and

[50] There are many reasons why parish- and school-based faith formation programs end in adolescence, including an alignment between religious education and the typical school year and a tendency to focus less on catechesis in adolescence and young adulthood. For more on this, see Mary C. Boys, *Educating in Faith: Maps and Visions* (Lima, OH: Academic Renewal Press, 1989).

[51] O'Keefe, *Navigating Toward Adulthood*, 130–34.

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older adults) can lend both precision and expansiveness to our social analyses. At the same time, as Bunge reminds us, young people are also sinners and in need of formation; including them in our theological view is a stern reminder that faith formation does not end with children and must include young people and, of course, middle-aged and older adults. Including adolescents and young adults in our theological view means that our reflections on the sinfulness of the world and of individuals will take on more nuance as more "occasions of sin" are brought into focus.

Young People Experience God's Grace

Theology since the mid-twentieth century has identified grace with both God's unconditional love for humanity and humanity's experience of God's presence and love in history. Rahner, in particular, provided Catholic theology with a renewed emphasis on grace, insisting that, because of God's universal love for humanity, grace is experienced by humans mediated through historical reality and in the experience of transcendence. For Rahner, human beings are drawn toward something larger than themselves because humans have an innate desire for the supernatural.[52] In other words, God's grace is known in the real lives of people as they experience the call toward something larger than themselves; grace is found in the experience of being called by God into relationship with God.

In "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," Rahner understands the experiences of childhood as experiences of transcendence and, therefore, of God's grace. He suggests that childhood is openness to the unknown, trust in others, and courage to face new experiences; in this, children experience transcendence and God's grace.[53] While Rahner insists that, as already fully human persons, children have the capacity for experiences of transcendence, what he does not reflect on is how these experiences are understood by the children themselves. In other words, because the experience of grace is seen in "the corner of the eye,"[54] awareness of it requires an ability to be

[52] Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans, William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad Publishing1994), 31–32.

[53] Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," 48.

[54] Roger Haight, *The Experience and Language of Grace* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 127–28. "Human spirit *is* transcendence; it is a capacity for an active openness to the infinite and absolute … Awareness of one's own transcendence appears in the 'corner of the eye' as a horizon or a field in which the spirit operates. One has an unthematic or preconceptual awareness that the orientation beyond oneself reaches even to infinity … Grace [therefore] is operative in the experience of infinite longings, of radical optimism, of unquenchable discontent, of the torment of the insufficiency of everything attainable, of the radical protest against death, the experience of being confronted with an absolute

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present to oneself and one's experiences, an ability that children and adolescents are still in the process of developing. Thus, while we can insist with Rahner that an adolescent or young adult *has* experiences of transcendence, we cannot say with certainty that they understand this in the same way that adults would.

Young people are, according to developmental psychologist Robert Kegan, enmeshed in a cognitive growth process that is shaping the ways that they make meaning of their world. In particular, young people are in the process of making the mental leap from what Kegan calls second-order thinking to third-order thinking.[55] Second-order thinkers are able to recognize durable categories—that objects can be grouped into categories that have characteristics that endure. Similarly, second-order thinkers recognize that other people are individuals who have their own ideas, desires, and points of view.[56] As people transition into third-order thinkers, they develop the ability to think across durable categories. As Kegan puts it: "The capacity to subordinate durable categories to the interaction between them makes their thinking abstract, their feelings a matter of inner states and self-reflexive emotion, and their social relating capable of loyalty and devotion to a community of people or ideas larger than the self."[57] It is only with the development of third-order thinking that people are able to stand outside of a relationship to analyze it, to value the relationship in itself (and not simply for what it provides), and to think about abstract concepts like friendship. And, to emphasize Kegan's claim, it is only with third-order thinking that a person can recognize and analyze the experience of transcendence—the experience of "ideas larger than the self."

That grace is experienced as a "corner of the eye" glimpse means that grace is often known in the reflection after the fact on the experience of transcendence and not necessarily in the experience itself. Many, perhaps most, young people (and many adults) are not yet developmentally capable of this

love precisely where it is lethally incomprehensible and seems to be silent and aloof, the experience of a radical guilt and of a still-abiding hope, and so on."

[55] Kegan prefers not to use the term "stage" when talking about cognitive development because these processes are evolutionary (rather than a period of stasis followed by a significant shift) and because he prefers not to bind cognitive development with chronological age. He prefers the term "order" to describe the ways in which meaning-making is ordered and reordered in an individual's thinking. For Kegan, first-order thinking, which is characteristic of children, is capable of recognizing durable objects, that objects exist outside of themselves. Second-order thinking sees the connections among those durable objects, organizing them into durable categories; with the onset of third-order thinking, people recognize the relationships among categories. See Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 34.

[56] Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 21.

[57] Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 28–29.

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level of abstract reflection on a relationship or experience. For them, relationships and experiences are things that "just are." Despite this not-yet-developed ability, however, we need to explicitly affirm that young people's experiences are, in fact, experiences of God's grace—God's unconditional love for humanity and the experience of that in our historical situated-ness. Therefore, including young people in our theological reflections on the doctrine of grace means that we need to account for how grace is experienced by people who are not yet able to describe, much less reflect on, that experience for themselves. However, including this affirmation of the presence of God and the experience of that presence as grace in the life of adolescents and young adults (as well as children and those with cognitive or developmental differences) is a reminder that our definitions of grace always need to be open and expansive, that there is no human experience that is excluded from God's grace, even when that experience cannot be recognized, described, or reflected on.

Conclusion

Pope Francis gives theologians a great deal to reflect on with his 2019 apostolic exhortation, *Christus Vivit*. His recognition of the challenges facing contemporary young people, as well as the many and various gifts they bring to the church, means that theologians need to take age seriously as a category of reflection in our theological anthropologies. Francis insists that adolescence and young adulthood are not merely stages of development through which one must pass in order to reach the goal of adulthood. There is a givenness to adolescence and young adulthood; it is an "already and not yet." Although it is true that these are life stages through which people grow and develop, they are also moments in an individual's development that are valuable for their own sake. Rahner names this "already and not yet" perspective when we think about childhood: "The grace of childhood is not merely the pledge of the grace of adulthood.... The fact that [childhood] contributes to the later stages of life is not the sole criterion of its own intrinsic rightness. It must be the case that childhood is valuable in itself."[58] Francis is calling us to a "theology of youth" that names youth as graced in itself and not merely as a stepping stone to the grace of adulthood. Incorporating age and the experiences of people across the life span into our theological anthropologies will provide the church with a more capacious theology of the human person that will better ground the pastoral and formational work of its ministers.

[58] Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," 37.

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