

What is it to be young?

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The International Youth Day will be observed on 12 August, with mental health to be given special attention this year. Pope Francis has already drawn attention to another area, namely social exclusion and unemployment in today's competitive world, and he has highlighted the 'losers' through the biblical verse of Matt 5:3, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'.

The Pope frequently addresses the danger of lack of equality and inclusion, not least caused by unemployment that many countries experience today, and it affects the youth harder than others. It should be noted that the youth are eager to participate and contribute, but the labour market doesn't always need them, neither in blue color nor in white color jobs. In future, the youth themselves – when they get into posts of responsibility – must find new ways of sharing resources, including jobs for all, also the youth without work experience, people with mental challenges, and others who are not 'winners'.

We often talk about youth as one category, one type of people. But the group, which is defined as the 15-24-year olds, is a diverse group. Besides, there are other factors than age that define 'youth'. Youth are young at age, yes, but more important, it is their thoughts and ideas that define the group. And that is why we need them to solve the ailments of the present day: the conflicts in the Middle East and the Arab World, in Ukraine, and other geopolitical, economic, cultural and religious disagreements. Terrorism is at most the tip of the iceberg and rather showing that groups of people have been oppressed, without means to be heard, be included and shape their own future – as we all want to do.

"We all want to live long, but no one wants to grow old", my uncles used to say when I was a teenager. Somehow, I was a bit surprised that he said it, because he was otherwise not very philosophical, or so I thought. But he was a much deeper thinker than many others around considering themselves more intellectual, especially in religious fields. He also used to remind us to count our days, that a person's age is seventy, and that the rest is only bonus.

In Pakistan, when Imran Khan and other politicians say they want to give young people a chance in politics and decision making, that is good, yet, we should also ask them what they really mean. Do they actually think of people below a certain age, say 25, which would mean the majority of the country's population? And have they included some of them in their leadership teams?

Instead of age, 'young' may rather mean people with different and alternative ideas; people who question the existing ways, have new thoughts, and search for other approaches to solve problems. They would often be young at age, but not always. It is not only the young who question the expression 'it cannot be done'. Also older people, who have tried to solve problems, with and without success, may never give up curiosity and keep turn more stones. Hence, older people might come up with new ideas, and they may have grown impatient and be in a hurry to see new things.

Older people might indeed like to work with young people, too, because they might be more willing to take risks and try the unknown – especially if most of the responsibility for the consequences rests with the older team members. But young people's ideas would be invaluable in the team. Besides, it is often the diversity in ideas that contributes to the best results. It is teams that are composed of young and old, men and women, educated and not so well educated, immigrants and persons from the indigenous populations, and so on, that are

most creative. There must always be a strong belief in a project, but there should also be people in the midst who are skeptical to ‘everything’, and have ‘third way’ suggestions.

Luckily then, since I am not young biologically any more, I can also be included in the ‘good company’ of young and innovative people, in diverse teams. After all, I am not quite beyond ‘expiry date’, and I intend to keep participating actively for another 30 years! Yet, since I am not from Pakistan, there are so many things I don’t know about the local conditions, and I still try to learn. That keeps me young and humble. Furthermore, I was educated in a culture where all were Christian, all were Caucasian, blond and blue-eyed; that’s how Norway was fifty or sixty years ago. I lived in the capital Oslo when the new, multicultural life was just taking off, with Pakistani immigrants driving trams and trains, running corner shops and serving potatoes and meatballs in restaurants and fast food kiosks, and much more. And there were students from Nigeria and USA, and a whole batch came from China. Some Asians had been expelled from Idi Amin’s Uganda and made Norway their new land. I studied and worked in the midst of all this. Later, I worked in Africa, America and Asia.

I believe my diverse cultural experience was a fantastic privilege, and it has helped keeping me young at heart and mind. And it has also helped me understand what in my own culture I cherish, and add new values; yet, it is important to have a foundation somewhere.

When one travels and lives abroad, one is reminded of limitations in own knowledge and skills, but also, in strength and competence. What is most important is to reflect on what it is to live, and to try to be a decent human beings, wherever we live in the world; I often share views on this with young people, and it is an inspiration.

There are certain things that are universal, but then the solutions to local problems can only be found in the local context. It is the local usefulness that should guide us. But what that means must also be analyzed carefully, because some may gain while others lose. In our globalized world today, we see that all the time; often, small elites of foreigners and the multinationals gain from the new and innovative ideas and actions, while others lose. And those outsiders may stand in the way for the local companies to come up. The locals may lack capital, not competence and innovate and creative ideas. I believe that the telecommunications sector is an example of locals being sidelined. In that field, as in many other fields, we must ask for local shares in that expanding business and industry. Don’t tell me that Pakistan doesn’t have the young minds, new ideas, and the ability to succeed!

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