BACKGROUND
The wider process started with the Synod on the New Evangelisation (2012) and the resulting Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium (2013), on the Joy of the Gospel. The Synod came at the start of the Year of Faith. The Aparecida document also factored heavily into Evangelii Gaudium. Aparecida was a document of the South American bishops which Pope Francis, then a Cardinal, was a key architect of. Hence, there are key strains here of both Pope Benedict and Pope Francis. Laudato Si' also features throughout the Preparatory Document. The two synods on the family and Amoris Laetitia, were an attempt to examine how the Joy of the Gospel could be expressed in families. This process, following on from that, is an attempt to do the same for young people.

INTRODUCTION TO THE PREPARATORY DOCUMENT
The focus and title is for the forthcoming Synod is Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment', and it seems that it is about vocational discernment in the broader sense i.e. not simply about increasing vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

The intro to the Preparatory Document. states that “the Church has decided to examine herself on how she can lead young people to recognise and accept the call to the fullness of life and love, and to ask young people to help her in identifying the most effective ways to announce the Good News today. By listening to young people, the Church will once again hear the Lord speaking in today’s world. As in the days of Samuel (cf. 1 Sam 3:1-21) and Jeremiah (cf. Jer 1:4-10), young people know how to discern the signs of our 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.”

The publication of the Preparatory Document begins a consultation phase with “the entire people of God.” This will include a web based survey for young people, and questions for Bishops’ Conferences etc, which are given at the end of the document. Along with the Peparatory Document, the Holy Father has also written to young people. The consultation will inform the Instrumentum laboris (working instrument) which will “be the reference point in the discussion of the synod fathers.”

SUMMARY OF THE 3 PARTS OF THE DOCUMENT

Section 1 clarifies the term 'youth' for this context: “In the following pages, the word “youth” refers to persons who are roughly 16 to 29 years old, while bearing in mind that the term needs to be adapted to local circumstances. In any case, it is good to remember that the term “youth”, in addition to referring to persons, is a stage of life that each generation understands in an unequal, original manner.”

Part 1. The social and cultural dynamics of the world in which young people live
The document notes that this isn’t a comprehensive analysis, but rather draws on some recent research so as to provide a framework.

There is not just one world for young people. Different parts of the world vary, especially along the lines of how gender is viewed, whether Christian faith is in the majority or is a minority, and whether young people are many in an area with a high birth rate, or not.

The world is changing rapidly at the moment. This brings “fluidity and uncertainty never before experienced,” and therefore vulnerability. This is seen especially in the labour market, where young people can often be exploited. The rise of technology has also led in part to a more isolating “throw-away” culture, which is also harmful to the environment. Many societies are also becoming multi-religious. The world of young people is different to that of their parents.
Globalisation means that young people are becoming more homogenous around the world, while also still living in their own cultures, which affects how they socialise and form their identities.

Particular difficulties for young people in some parts of the world include extreme poverty, being orphaned, no access to education, homelessness, migration and displacement, exploitation, trafficking and slavery, crime and the phenomenon of child soldiers, forced marriage. Oftentimes, girls face worse difficulties.

Studies show that young people “do not see themselves as a disadvantaged” class or a social group to be protected.” Rather, they want to be involved in shaping what’s around them. They flourish when given the chance to get involved and form their identities. They get frustrated when stifled. “Besides passivity, a lack of confidence in themselves and their abilities can manifest itself in an excessive concern for their self-image and in a submissive conformity to passing fads.”

“Various research studies show that young people have a need for persons of reference, who are close-by, credible, consistent and honest, in addition to places and occasions for testing their ability to relate to others (both adults and peers) and dealing with their feelings and emotions. Young people look for persons of reference who are able to express empathy and offer them support, encouragement and help in recognizing their limits, but without making them feel they are being judged.”

“From this vantage point, the role of parents and families is crucial yet sometimes problematic. The older generations often tend to underestimate young people’s potential”

Young people also seek these persons of reference among their peers, hence their desire for strong peer connections.

“Young people, cautious by nature of those who are outside their circle of personal relationships, oftentimes nourish mistrust, indifference or anger towards institutions.” - including the Church, the document notes.

“Though young people are not in open “opposition”, they learn to live “without” the God presented by the Gospel and “without” the Church and to rely on alternative and minimally-institutionalized forms of religion and spirituality or to take refuge in sects or religious experiences with a strong affiliation. In many places, the presence of the Church is becoming less widespread and, consequently, more difficult to encounter, while the dominant culture is the bearer of needs oftentimes at odds with Gospel values…”

Young people today are in part a “hyper-connected generation” because of technology, virtual environments etc. This carries both risks and opportunities and is something the Church must respond to. They are more reluctant to make definitive choices that cannot be later reversed. They are more reflective on their choices. The prep document offers Pope Francis’ words form 2016 as an antidote to this:

“‘How can we reawaken the greatness and the courage of comprehensive choices, of the impulses of the heart in order to face academic and emotional challenges?’ The phrase I use very often is: take a risk! Take a risk. Whoever does not risk does not walk. ‘But what if I make a mistake?’ . Blessed be the Lord! You will make more mistakes if you remain still” (Discourse at Villa Nazareth, 18 June 2016).

This courage can only be found through and with Jesus.

Young people today find their choices hampered by, for instance, the inability to find work – this is the case for women and girls especially. It is important for young people to develop skills so that they can properly contribute. Societies will only move forward and out of old paradigms if “new people” – i.e. young people – are able to be involved in shaping the future.

Part 2. The fundamental steps of the process of discernment

The Church is concerned that she does not abandon young people to the difficulties of our times, but journeys with them to help them realise their full potential.

“Offering others the gifts that one has received means accompanying them and walking beside them on this journey as they deal with the weaknesses and difficulties in their lives, and especially supporting them in the exercise of freedom which is still being formed. Consequently, the Church, beginning with her Pastors, is called to make a self-examination and to rediscover her vocation of caring for others in the manner recommended by Pope Francis at the beginning of his pontificate: “...caring [and] protecting demand goodness; [they] call for a certain tenderness.”

“From this perspective, some ideas will now be presented regarding accompanying young people, beginning
with the faith and listening to the tradition of the Church, with the clear objective of supporting them in their vocational discernment and their making fundamental choices in life, starting from an awareness that some of these choices are permanent.”

“Faith is the source of vocational discernment”

“If the vocation to the joy of love is the fundamental call that God has placed in the heart of every young person so that each one’s existence will bear fruit, faith is both a gift from on high and a response to feeling oneself chosen and loved.” The prep document quotes Lumen Gentium:

“Faith is no refuge for the fainthearted, but something which enhances our lives. It makes us aware of a magnificent calling, the vocation of love. It assures us that this love is trustworthy and worth embracing, for it is based on God’s faithfulness which is stronger than our every weakness” (Lumen fidei, 53). This faith ‘becomes a light capable of illumining all our relationships in society’, contributing to building ‘a universal brotherhood’ among the men and women of our time (ibid., 54).”

Conscience is key in making decisions and young people must be taught to discern “the voice of the Spirit” in their consciences. Many things can stall a person on the path to the fulfilment especially at the present time. In this vein, discernment is vital for young people.

“With this in mind, the focus in the case of the synod is on vocational discernment, that is, the process by which a person makes fundamental choices, in dialogue with the Lord and listening to the voice of the Spirit, starting with the choice of one’s state in life. The question of how a person is not to waste the opportunities for self-realization is part-and-parcel of every man and woman. For the believer, the question becomes even more intense and profound, namely, how does a person live the good news of the Gospel and respond to the call which the Lord addresses to all those he encounters, whether through marriage, the ordained ministry or the consecrated life? Where can a person’s talents be put to good use: a professional life, volunteer work, service to the needy or involvement in civil and political life?"

The Preparatory Document then offers the framework of Recognising, Interpreting and Choosing.

**Recognising** that “the Word of God is of great importance. Meditating on it, in fact, mobilizes the passions as in all experiences which touch one’s inner self, but, at the same time, offers the possibility of making them emerge and identifying with them in the events it narrates. The stage of ‘recognizing’ focuses on the ability to listen and on one’s feelings and emotions, without avoiding the arduous effort of silence, a critical step in personal growth, particularly for young people”

**Interpreting** is about taking what has been recognised and realising what the Spirit is calling us to do. This requires patience, vigilance and knowledge. This can require an honest confrontation, especially in applying difficult teachings etc, “The assistance of an experienced person in listening to the Spirit, however, is a valuable support that the Church offers, a support which would be unwise to disregard”

**Choosing** – “Once all the desires and emotions are recognised and interpreted, the next step in making a decision is an exercise of authentic human freedom and personal responsibility, which, of course, is always connected to a concrete situation and therefore limited” Decisions are then tested in the real world to see if they are right or not. They do not “remain virtual.”

“As for all important things in life, vocational discernment is a long process unfolding over time, during which one continues to monitor the signs used by the Lord to indicate and specify a vocation that is very personal and unique.”

“Only by giving up being selfishly occupied with one’s needs does a person become open to accommodate God’s plan in family life, the ordained ministry or consecrated life and seriously to carry out one’s profession as well as sincerely to seek the common good. Particularly in places where the culture is more deeply marked by individualism, choices need to be examined to see whether the pursuit of self-fulfilment might be the result of narcissism or instead includes a willingness to live one’s life logically in compliance with the generosity of the gift of self. Consequently, contact with poverty, vulnerability and need are of great importance on the road to vocational discernment. Above all, members of the formation staff in seminaries should confirm and foster in seminarians a willingness to become imbued with the ‘smell of the sheep.’”

**Accompaniment** is important here and the Church takes seriously her task of accompanying the younger generation. This is done through relationships and also utilising much of her resources.
Part 3. Key points in a pastoral vocational programme for youth

The Document lists five key areas:

1. Walking with young people

“Accompanying young people requires going beyond a preconceived framework, encountering young people where they are, adapting to their times and pace of life and taking them seriously. This is to be done as young people seek to make sense of the reality in which they live and to utilize the message which they have received in words and deeds in their daily attempts to create a personal history and in the more-or-less conscious search for meaning in their lives.”

Sunday Mass and Baptism “is not the same as making a mature choice for a life of faith.” Rather “Arriving at this point requires a journey which sometimes includes unpredictable paths and uncustomary places which are far removed from ecclesial communities”.

“Vocational pastoral ministry is learning the style of Jesus, who passes through the places of daily life, stops without being hurried and, by looking at our brothers with mercy, leads them to encounter God the Father (Address to Participants in the International Conference on Pastoral Work for Vocations, 21 October 2016).”

“every community needs to give importance to creative ways of addressing young people in a personal way and supporting personal development. In many cases, the task involves learning to allow for something new and not stifling what is new by attempting to apply a preconceived framework. No seed for vocations can be fruitful if approached with a closed and ‘complacent pastoral attitude that says: ‘We have always done it this way’ and without people being ‘bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities’ (Evangelii Gaudium, 33).”

This is all about going out, seeing, and calling. It’s about going to where they are, spending time with them, learning about them and calling them as Jesus did.

2. Agents

“In pastoral activity, young people are not objects but agents. Oftentimes, society sees them as non-essential or inconvenient. The Church cannot reflect such an attitude, because all young people, without exception, have the right to be guided in life’s journey.”

Hence, communities must be attentive to young people, especially those who are in certain difficulties. The entire Church is responsible for educating and guiding young people. The document returns again to the importance of People of Reference. “The role of credible adults and their cooperation is basic in the course of human development and vocational discernment. This requires authoritative believers, with a clear human identity, a strong sense of belonging to the Church, a visible spiritual character, a strong passion for education and a great capacity for discernment”

These credible adults need good training and support. The roles of parents & families, clergy and teachers and educators are highlighted as being of particular importance.

3. Places – Specific places for Youth Ministry (my term) can help young people with all of the above. Specifically noted are: World Youth Days; Parish events and activities; Universities and Catholic schools; Social activities and volunteer work; Associations and ecclesial movements; Seminaries.

Note is also made of the digital world, the new areopagus!

4. Resources – “Although many fruitful encounters take place in the Church’s activity and the expectations of young people in areas of the Bible, liturgy, art, catechesis and the media, the Church sometimes has a difficult time finding the proper language and expressions to speak to young people. Many dream of a Church capable of significantly involving young people in her activity through her use, among others, of young people’s means of expression and by showing appreciation and the importance of young people’s creativity and talents.”
Sports are a resource, as they provide a place for young people to “manifest their individuality.”

“As opposed to situations in the past, the Church needs to get accustomed to the fact that the ways of approaching the faith are less standardized, and therefore she must become more attentive to the individuality of each person. Together with those who continue to follow the traditional stages of Christian initiation, many come to encounter the Lord and the community of believers in other ways and later in life, for example, coming from a commitment to justice, or from contacts outside the Church with someone who is a credible witness. The challenge for communities is to receive everyone, following the example of Jesus who could speak with Jews and Samaritans and with pagans in Greek culture and Roman occupiers, seizing upon the deep desires of each one of them.”

Silence, contemplation, and prayer are also given special note. “In particular, Lectio divina is a valuable method, which Church tradition has always followed”

5. Mary of Nazareth. The Synod process is trusted to Mary, to her intercession and to her example.

QUESTIONS
The rest of the Preparatory Document comprises the questions for gathering information for the working document or Instrumentum laboris.

The full Preparatory Document is available on the Vatican website