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SESSION

Presence

1
SESSION 1: PRESENCE

Extract from Catching Fire

To grow the capacity of Presence is to nurture a deep sense that God is present and part of our lives and the life of the world. It is to believe that every encounter, every moment, is rich with sacred possibility. It is to look into the eyes of each other and see reflected there God's own being. Christians believe that in Jesus Christ, God has entered the world, 'one like us.' For the early disciples, Jesus was 'The Way' – the way to the heart of God, and the way to fully live. Our central Christian belief remains that: in Jesus, the fully human and fully divine are one. This is the theology of incarnation and it changes not only the way we look at each other, but the way we see and live and have our being in the world.

1. Chapter: from the book “Seeking Spirituality” by Ron Rolheiser:

The Concept of the Incarnation

Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which Christ’s compassion must look out on the world.
Yours are the feet with which
He is to go about doing good.
Yours are the hands with which He is to bless us now.

The Centrality of Christ

We measure time in relationship to the birth of Jesus. All dates end with a tiny suffix, BC or AD, indicating whether an event took place before Jesus’ birth or after. The whole world does this. There are reasons beyond the purely religious why this is so. Nonetheless, the fact that the whole world records time in relationship to the birth of Jesus does indicate something about his importance. For those of us who are Christians, time obviously should be measured by when Jesus was born. For us, he is the centre of everything: our meaning, our hope, our self-understanding, our church lives, our theologies, and our spiritualities. He is also the guide for our discipleship.

Spirituality, as we saw, is about creatively disciplining the fiery energies that flow through us. Hence a good spirituality requires a certain discipleship. A disciple is someone under a discipline. Jesus laid out certain disciplines to channel our energies creatively. But he did more than this and he was more than this.

Who is Jesus Christ? If Jesus, himself, did a survey today asking each of us personally the question he once asked Peter, ‘Who do you say that I am?’ he would, I am sure, get a wide variety of answers. Who is Jesus for us, really? An historical person, a God-man (whatever that means!), a great moral teacher, a philosophy, a church, a dogma, a figure for piety, a superstition, a mythical super-Santa, a household god? Who really is Jesus for us?

Most of us who are Christians have at least this in common about Jesus. We admire him, as Soren Kierkegaard once pointed out; however, this is not enough. What Jesus wants from us is not admiration, but imitation. It is far easier to admire figures of great morality and courage than to do what they do. Admiration alone is a weak thing. Imitation is more important, though we need to go even beyond that as regards Jesus. He is more than a model to be imitated. What Jesus wants is not admiration, nor simple imitation (no one...
does Jesus very well anyway!). What Jesus wants of us is to undergo his presence so as to enter into a community of life and celebration with him. Jesus, as John Shea says, is not a law to be obeyed or a model to be imitated, but a presence to be seized and acted upon. What exactly does that mean? The task of this chapter and the next will be to try to answer that question.

Undergoing Jesus must be the centre of any Christian spirituality. Within Christian spirituality, long before we speak of anything else (church, dogmas, commandments, even admonitions to love and justice), we must speak about Jesus, the person and the energy that undergirds everything else; after all, everything else is merely a branch. Jesus is the vine, the blood, the pulse, and the heart. But how to understand Jesus? There have been, easily, five hundred serious theological books written about Jesus in the past thirty years. The intent here is not to try to summarise these, but to situate Jesus and the discipleship he asks of us within the context of the central mystery of Christianity, the Incarnation, the mystery of the word made flesh.

Jesus and the discipleship he asks of us can best be understood within a single phrase: “The word was made flesh and it dwells among us”. (John 1:14)

The Concept of the Incarnation: ‘The Word made Flesh’

The central mystery within all of Christianity, undergirding everything else, is the mystery of the Incarnation. Unfortunately, it is also the mystery that is the most misunderstood or, more accurately, to coin a phrase, under-understood. It is not so much that we misunderstand what the Incarnation means; it is more that we grasp only the smallest tip of a great iceberg. We miss its meaning by not seeing its immensity.

Generally, we think of the Incarnation this way: In the beginning, God created the world and everything in it, including the creation of humanity. But humanity soon sinned (original sin) and became helpless to save itself. God, in his goodness and mercy, however, decided to save humanity, despite its sin. So God prepared a people by calling the patriarchs and then the prophets. Through them, God slowly readied the people (the Jewish Scriptures). Finally, when the time was right, God sent his own son, Jesus, who was born in Palestine nearly two thousand years ago. Jesus was God, but also fully a man. He had two natures: one human, the other divine. Jesus walked this earth for thirty-three years. He revealed God’s nature, taught great truths, healed people, worked miracles, but eventually was falsely accused, arrested, crucified, and died. He rose three days later and, for the next forty days, made various appearances to his followers. At the end of this time, with his followers now more adjusted to the new reality of the resurrection, he took them to a hillside outside Jerusalem, blessed them, and ascended, physically, to heaven.

In this concept, God walked this earth, physically, for thirty-three years, and then returned to heaven, leaving us the Holy Spirit, a real but less-physical presence of God. The physical body of Jesus the word made flesh, was with us for thirty-three years and is now in heaven.

What is wrong with this? It is right – in its own symbolic, beautiful language – about many things: our sin, God’s mercy, God becoming physically to earth. Where it is wrong is that it gives the impression that the Incarnation was a thirty-year experiment, a one-shot incursion by God into human history. In this version, God came to earth physically and then, after thirty-three years, went back home. It uses the past tense for the Incarnation and that is a dangerous under-understanding. The Incarnation is still going on and it is just as real and as
radically physical as when Jesus of Nazareth, in the flesh, walked the dirt roads of Palestine.

How can this be so?

**The Hermeneutical Key: ‘Giving Skin to God’**

The mystery of the Incarnation, simply stated, is the mystery of God taking on human flesh and dealing with human beings in a visible, tangible way. The radical character of this, however, needs some explanation, especially as it pertains to three things: why God would act in this way; the shocking rawness of this kind of act; and its ongoing, rather than one-shot, character.

**The Why of the Incarnation**

Why would God want to take on human flesh? Why would an infinite power want to limit itself within the confines of history and a human body? Why Incarnation?

There is a marvellous story told about a four-year-old child who awoke one night frightened, convinced that in the darkness around her there were all kinds of spooks and monsters. Alone, frightened, she ran to her parents’ bedroom. Her mother calmed her down and, taking her by the hand, led her back to her own room where she put on a light and reassured the child with these words: ‘You needn’t be afraid, you are not alone here. God is in the room with you.’ The child replied: ‘I know that God is here, but I need someone in this room who has some skin!’

In essence, that story gives us the reason for the Incarnation, as well as an excellent definition of it. God takes on flesh because, like this young girl, we all need someone with us who has some skin. A God who is everywhere is just as easily nowhere. We believe in what we can touch, see, hear, smell, and taste. We are not angels, without bodies, but sensual creatures in the true sense of the word, sensuality. We have five senses and we are present in the world through those senses. We know through them, communicate through them, and are open to each other and the world only through them. And God, having created our nature, respects how it operates. Thus, God deals with us through our senses. The Jesus who walked the roads of Palestine could be seen, touched, and heard. In the Incarnation, God became physical because we are creatures of the senses who, at a point, need a God with some skin.

Nikos Kazantzakis once explained this by way of a parable:

_A man came up to Jesus and complained about the hiddenness of God. ‘Rabbi, he said, ‘I am an old man. During my whole life, I have always kept the commandments. Every year of my adult life, I went to Jerusalem and offered the prescribed sacrifices. Every night of my life, I have not retired to my bed without first saying my prayers. But … I look at stars and sometimes the mountains – and wait, wait for God to come so that I might see him. I have waited for years and years, but in vain. Why? Why? Mine is a great grievance, Rabbi! Why doesn’t God show himself?’_

Jesus smiled and responded gently: ‘Once upon a time there was a marble throne at the eastern gate of a great city. On this throne sat 3,000 kings. All of them called upon God to appear so that they might see him, but all went to their graves with their wishes unfulfilled._
‘Then, when the kings had died, a pauper, barefooted and hungry, came and sat upon that throne. “God,” he whispered, “the eyes of a human being cannot look directly at the sun, for they would be blinded. How then, Omnipotent, can they look directly at you? Have pity, Lord, temper your strength, and turn down your splendour so that I, who am poor and afflicted, may see you!”

‘Then – listen, old man – God became a piece of bread, a cup of cool water, a warm tunic, a hut and, in front of the hut, a woman nursing an infant.’

‘Thank you, Lord,’ he whispered. ‘You humbled yourself for my sake. You became the bread, water, a warm tunic, and a wife and a child in order that I might see you. And I did see you. I bow down and worship your beloved many-faced face.

God takes on flesh so that every home becomes a church, every child becomes the Christ-child, and all food and drink becomes a sacrament. God’s many faces are now everywhere, in flesh, tempered and turned down, so that our human eyes can see him. God, in his many-faced face, has become as accessible, and visible, as the nearest water tap. That is the why of the Incarnation.

The shocking raw, physical character of the Incarnation

The Incarnation is shocking in the rawness of its physical character. The English word ‘incarnation’ takes its root in the Latin word, *carnus*, meaning flesh, physical flesh. But, in Latin as in English, this is a very un-Platonic word. There is nothing spiritual about it. It emphasises, as do its English derivatives (carnality, carnal, carnivorous) the body in its raw, brute, physical tangibility. *Incarnation* means *in-carnus*: literally *in physical flesh*.

We usually do not have much trouble conceiving of Jesus in this way, although, even there, we often hesitate to think of Jesus’ body as mortal, sexual, and subject to illness, smell, and other humbling bodily processes. The problem rather, as we shall soon point out, is that we do not attribute the same physical reality to the whole Body of Christ, namely, to the Eucharist and the body of believers.

Its ongoing character

Finally, and of critical importance, is question of the ongoing nature of the Incarnation. The Incarnation is not a thirty-three year experiment by God in history, a one-shot, physical incursion into our lives. The Incarnation began with Jesus and it has never stopped. The ascension of Jesus did not end, nor fundamentally change, the Incarnation. God’s physical body is still among us. God is still present, as physical and as real today, as he/she was in the historical Jesus. God still has skin, human skin, and physically walks on this earth just as Jesus did. In a certain manner of speaking, it is true to say that, at the ascension, the physical body of Jesus left this earth, but the body of Christ did not. God’s incarnational presence among us continues as before. What is being said here?

An initial distinction is key: ‘Christ’, as you know, is not Jesus’ surname name. We do not say ‘Jesus Christ’ in the same way as we say ‘Susan Parker’ or ‘Jack Smith’. Jesus did not have a surname. The word Christ is a title, connoting God’s anointed, messianic presence on this earth. Scripture uses the expression the ‘body of Christ’ to mean three things: *Jesus*, the historical person who walked this earth for thirty-three years; the *Eucharist*, which is also the physical presence of God among us; and the *body of believers*, which is also the real presence. To say the word ‘Christ’ is to refer, at one and the same time, to Jesus, the Eucharist, and the community of faith.
We are the body of Christ. This is not an exaggeration, nor a metaphor. To say that the body of believers is the body of Christ is not to say something that Scripture does not. Scripture, and Paul in particular, never tells us that the body of believers replaces Christ’s body, nor that it represents Christ’s body, nor even that it is Christ’s mystical body. It says simply: ‘We are Christ’s body.

Scholars disagree among themselves as to precisely how literally Paul meant this. When he says we are the body of Christ does he mean this in a corporate or a corporeal way? Are we Christ’s body the way a group animated by a common spirit (say, for instance, the Jesuits) are a body? Or, are we a body like a physical organism is a body? With some qualifications (and, of course, some exceptions) Scripture scholars agree that it is the latter. The body of believers, like the Eucharist, is the body of Christ in an organic way. It is not a corporation, but a body; not just a mystical reality, but a physical one; and not something that represents Christ, but something that is him.

This has immense implications. It means that the Incarnation did not end after thirty-three years, when Jesus ascended. God is still here, in the flesh, just as real and just as physical, as God was in Jesus. The Word did not just become flesh and dwell among us – it became flesh and continues to dwell among us. In the body of believers and in the Eucharist, God still has physical skin and can still be physically seen, touched, smelled, heard and tasted.

But this is not simply a truth of theology, a dogma to be believed. It is the core of Christian spirituality. If it is true that we are the body of Christ, and it is, then God’s presence in the world today depends very much upon us. We have to keep God present in the world in the same way as Jesus did. We have to become, as Teresa of Avila so simply put it, God’s physical hands, feet, mouthpiece, and heart in this world. Scripture scholar, Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, summarises the importance of this less simply than Teresa, but very accurately:

_The community mediates Christ to the world. The work that he spoke is not heard in our contemporary world unless it is proclaimed by the community. The power that flowed forth from him in order to enable response is no longer effective unless manifested by the community. As God once acted through Christ, so he now acts through those who are confirmed to the image of his Son and whose behaviour-pattern is in imitation of his. What Christ did in and for the world of his day through his physical presence, the community does in and for its world. In order to continue to exercise his salvific function the Risen Christ must be effectively represented within the context of real existence by an authenticity which is modelled on his._

_The Difference between a Christian and a theist_

What difference does it make whether one believes in Christ or whether one simply believes in God? What does Christ add to God? What does being Christian add to theism?

The difference is huge, not just in theology, but especially in spirituality, in the way we are asked to live out our faith lives. A theist believes in God. A Christian believes in God, but also in a God who is incarnate. What is the difference? To put the matter into street-language, one might say: A theist believes in a God in heaven whereas a Christian believes in a God in heaven who is also physically present on this earth inside human beings. The theistic God is transcendent and, if not wholly so, present in matter only as some vague ground of being, but has a physical body on earth. The Christian God can be seen, heard, felt, tasted, and smelled through the senses. The Christian God has some skin.

The Christian God is _in-carnus_, has concrete flesh on this earth. This may seem rather abstract to us, but its implications colour every aspect of how we relate to God and to each other – how we pray, how we look for healing and reconciliation, how we seek guidance,
and how we understand community, religious experience, and mission. This, however, needs explication. So let us turn to look at what it means concretely in terms of spirituality, to believe in the Incarnation.

2. “Suddenly we become Aware,” by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

Faith does not spring out of nothing.
It comes with the discovery of the holy dimension of our existence.
Suddenly we become aware that our lips touch the veil
That hangs before the Holy of Holies.
Our faith is lit up for a time with the light from behind the veil.
Faith opens our hearts for the entrance of the holy.
This is how close we are to the holy.
When we open ourselves up to the possibility
That God can be there in any moment,
Miracle is all around us.
SESSION 2: PRAYER

Extract from Catching Fire

The simplest description of prayer is one that comes from St Augustine: Prayer is communication with God. And the way we each do this is as unique as we are. To grow the capacity of Prayer is to nurture a personal relationship with Jesus, through the Spirit and held in the Godhead – God the Father. It requires seeking out and regular practice in a personal prayer style that is connective and real. The place of prayer in Jesus’ life was non-negotiable, even in the midst of demanding crowds. His deep and nurtured connection to God was his centre, his heart. We too are called into relationship to discover the deep peace and wordless reality of God’s ever-present love. There are many forms of prayer and ways to pray. Here, we are giving focus to the personal rather than public forms, and the best place to go to seek a way to pray for yourself is the prayer traditions within our rich Church history. These include lectio divina, Christian meditation and the contemplative traditions.

1. Chapter extract: “Personal Prayer” by Bishop James Cuskelley

Personal Prayer

Our spiritual lives begin with faith in a God who loves us. This love is sheer grace, gift of God poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us. The grateful acknowledgement of these truths is itself a prayer as we open our minds and hearts to the Spirit of God.

Walking the way of Jesus

Faith and prayer are bound together. A living faith naturally expresses itself in prayer; faith needs to be nourished by prayer if it is to remain alive. Prayer is very much a matter of individual choice and personal taste. However, there are some ways of praying which should be part of everyone’s prayer life – such as the Our Father, the prayer that Jesus taught us. One of the oldest forms of prayer is called lectio divina or ‘divine reading’ – a prayerful reading of Scripture.

The Church recommends the reading of the Word of God as a source of Christian prayer, and at the same time exhorts all to discover the deep meaning of Sacred Scripture through prayer.

In the Bible, too, we find one of the easiest and most natural ways of praying – the ‘Eucharistic’ prayer. We all know that ‘Eucharist’ comes from a Greek word meaning ‘to give thanks’ and for many Catholics it has come to be identified with the Mass. But Eucharistic prayers existed long before Jesus and generally they contained four steps in an easy and natural method of prayer:

1. The Eucharistic prayer begins with a ‘calling to mind’. We recall all that God has done for us – ‘the wonderful works of God’. It is most moving to take part in prayer sessions in some countries where the people are very poor. A superficial observer would say that they have nothing for which to give thanks. Yet they spend quite some time in thanking God – for life, for health, for love, for Jesus Christ and all that he has done for us. Then we begin to understand why St Paul so stressed the value of gratitude for the spiritual life.

2. Having recalled what God has done for us, we pass naturally to the further steps of praising the goodness of God, and giving thanks for all that God has done.

3. Furthermore, as we call to mind God’s blessings, we are filled with confidence and trust: ‘So long thy power hath blessed me sure it still will lead me on’.
4. We then come to the final part of the Eucharistic prayer. As we have called to mind God’s blessings, we ask God to keep in mind all the blessed, to watch over us and to help us in our need.

Some prayers, which we learned in childhood, may need to be changed as our theological vision changes. For example, the act of faith that I learned went something like this: ‘O my God, I believe all that Thou hast taught because Thou art truth itself. I believe all that the Catholic Church believes and teaches’. In itself, there is merit in this prayer. However, an act of faith flowing more naturally from the vision of God’s love would run something like this: ‘O my God, I believe in your love, the love that gave me life, the love that redeemed me, the love that guides me.’

Time given to prayer will vary from one person to another. Cardinal Newman gave some advice on prayer, which is still very practical today:

> Watch and pray and meditate, that is, according to the leisure which God has given you. Give freely of your time to your Lord and Saviour, if you have it. If you have little, show your sense of the privilege by giving that little. But anyhow show that your heart and desires show that your life is with your God. Set aside every day times for seeking him...I am not calling on you to go out of the world or to abandon your duties in the world, but to redeem the time; not to give hours to mere amusement or society, while you give minutes to Christ.

Taste varies, too, from one person to another. I presume to quote a few prayers that appeal to me. The first three come from the Breviary:

**WALKING THE WAY OF JESUS**

Lord God, in your wisdom you created us,
By your providence you rule us;
Penetrate our inmost being with your holy light,
So that our way of life may always be one of faithful service to you.
Let your people’s cry come into your loving presence, Lord,
Forgive them their sins,
So that by your grace they may be devoted to your service
And rest secure under your protecting hand.
Our heart’s desire to love Thee, Lord,
Watch over while we sleep.

From the Mass for Australia Day comes an inspiring Australian prayer:

> God, powerful and gentle,
> You love this southern land
> And all its peoples, old and new.
> As the Cross shines in our heavens
> So may Christ bring light to our nation,
> As the waves encircle our shores
> So may your mercy enfold us all.
> May the God who formed our southern land
> Be for us a rock of strength.
> May the God who rules our southern seas
> Keep us safe in every storm.
> May the God who made our southern skies
> Turn our darkness into light.
Those looking for a prayer to the Holy Spirit could hardly do better than the Canberra meeting of the World Council of Churches which proposed this prayer:

- **Spirit of light:** let your wisdom shine on us.
- **Spirit of silence:** make us aware of God’s presence.
- **Spirit of courage:** dispel the fear in our hearts.
- **Spirit of fire:** inflame us with Christ’s love.
- **Spirit of peace:** help us to be still and listen to God’s Word.
- **Spirit of joy:** inspire us to proclaim the Good News.
- **Spirit of love:** help us to open ourselves to the needs of others.
- **Spirit of power:** give us your help and your strength.
- **Spirit of truth:** guide us in the way of Christ. Amen.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us that ‘the life of prayer is the habit of being in the presence of the thrice-holy God and in communion with him.’

One well-known prayer that stresses the presence of God is this:

- Christ be with me, Christ within me,
- Christ behind me, Christ before me,
- Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
- Christ to comfort and restore me,
- Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
- Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
- Christ in hearts of all that love me,
- Christ in mouths of friends and strangers.

**2. Article: “Mystic or Unbeliever” by Ron Rolheiser**

A generation ago, Karl Rahner made the statement that there would soon come a time when each of us will either be a mystic or a non-believer.

What is implied here?

At one level it means that anyone who wants to have faith today will need to be much more inner-directed than in previous generations. Why? Because up until our present generation in the secularized world, by and large, the culture helped carry the faith. We lived in cultures (often immigrant and ethnic subcultures) within which faith and religion were part of the very fabric of life. Faith and church were embedded in the sociology. It took a strong, deviant action not to go to church on Sunday. Today, as we know, the opposite is more true; it takes a strong, inner-anchored act to go to church on Sunday. We live in a moral and ecclesial diaspora and experience a special loneliness that comes with that. We have few outside supports for our faith.

The culture no longer carries the faith and the church. Simply put, we knew how to be believers and church-goers when we were inside communities that helped carry that for us, communities within which most everyone seemed to believe, most everyone went to church, and most everyone had the same set of moral values. Not incidentally, these communities were often immigrant, poor, under-educated, and culturally marginalized. In that type of setting, faith and church work more easily. Why? Because, among other reasons, as Jesus said, it is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven.

To be committed believers today, to have faith truly inform our lives, requires finding an inner anchor beyond the support and security we find in being part of the cognitive majority wherein we have the comfort of knowing that, since everyone else is doing this,
it probably makes sense. Many of us now live in situations where to believe in God and church is to find ourselves without the support of the majority and at times without the support even of those closest to us, spouse, family, friends, and colleagues. That’s one of the things that Rahner is referring to when he says we will be either mystics or non-believers.

But what is this deep, inner-anchor that is needed to sustain us? What can give us the support we need?

What can help sustain our faith when we feel like unanimity-minus-one is an inner centre of strength, meaning, and affectivity that is rooted in something beyond what the world thinks and what the majority are doing on any given day? There has to be a deeper source than outside affirmation to give us meaning, justification, and energy to continue to do what faith asks of us. What is that source?

In the gospel of John, the first words out of Jesus’ mouth are a question: What are you looking for? Essentially everything that Jesus does and teaches in the rest of John’s gospel gives an answer to that question: We are looking for the way, the truth, the life, living water to quench our thirst, bread from heaven to satiate our hunger. But those answers are partially abstract. At the end of the gospel, all of this is crystallized into one image:

On Easter Sunday morning, Mary Magdala goes out searching for Jesus. She finds him in a garden (the archetypal place where lovers meet) but she doesn’t recognize him. Jesus turns to her and, repeating the question with which the gospel began, asks her: What are you looking for? Mary replies that she is looking for the body of the dead Jesus and could he give her any information as to where that body is. And Jesus simply says: “Mary”. He pronounces her name in love. She falls at his feet.

In essence, that is the whole gospel: What are we ultimately looking for? What is the end of all desire? What drives us out into gardens to search for love? The desire to hear God pronounce our names in love. To hear God, lovingly say:” Mary”. “Jack”. “Jennifer”. “David”.

Several years ago, I made a retreat that began with the director telling us:" I’m only going to try to do one thing with you this week, I’m going to try to teach you how to pray so that sometime (perhaps not this week or perhaps not even this year, but sometime) in prayer, you will open yourself up in such a way that you can hear God say to you - I love you! - because unless that happens you will always be dissatisfied and searching for something to give you a completeness you don’t feel. Nothing will ever be quite right. But once you hear God say those words, you won’t need to do that restless search anymore”?

He’s right. Hearing God pronounce our names in love is the core of mysticism and it is too the anchor we need when we face misunderstanding from without and depression from within, when we feel precisely like unanimity-minus-one.
SESSION 3: PRINCIPLE

Extract from Catching Fire

Jesus’ vision of a discipleship of equals, of the reign of God breaking in on the world, was founded on core values. We now call these gospel values, and we believe that they lead us to fullness of life. These gospel values are compassion and justice, love and forgiveness, peace and hope.

To truly live by these values is challenging, as it was when Jesus first spoke of this new Kingdom of God. But Jesus modelled the power of living these values and people witnessed the transforming impact this had. It is no less powerful today when people witness to those same gospel values, and we believe that we are called to do that in our classrooms, our staffrooms, our offices, and our playgrounds.


At the outset, let me note that I am a Caucasian woman religious over 60 years of age, who has lived most of my life in the Northeast United States. My leadership experience includes eight years on the council of my religious congregation, serving on boards of not-for-profit organisations, chairing committees, and directing a leadership and spirituality centre. I recognise that I am both blessed and limited by my culture, my age, my history and my experiences. I offer my reflections on spirituality and leadership as one person’s perspective, one piece of the truth, in the hope that readers will enhance these insights with their own wisdom.

In this article, after briefly describing the context for leadership in today’s post-modern, transitional times, and presenting my understanding of both leadership and spirituality, I offer some learnings drawn from my personal experience. Then I suggest four aspects of the role of spiritual leader. Lastly, I share some reflections on the particular role of religious leaders.

Leading in an In-Between time

Any person who is called to leadership today faces a challenging task. This in-between time in our post-modern world is characterised by a sense of chaos and contingency, of suffering and limits, of isolation and fragmentation. Many nations and cultures in the developed world find themselves at a moral crossroads, without a sense of shared history and meaning, without belief in universal norms, unable to reach consensus on the common good. Society’s institutions, once respected and trusted, have lost credibility, have sunk into corruption and greed, and have become unresponsive to the needs of those they were founded to serve. Many decry the seeming failure of our leaders, religious and secular, to awaken passion for a common human future. At the same time, the post-modern ethos has its constructive aspects: It values diverse viewpoints and experiences, and it seeks to build connections among peoples, nations, and with the cosmos.

Our transition-time in the evolution of the universe is called by some “The Great Turning.” The term signals a time of danger and possibility, in which leaders play a particularly significant role.

Spirituality and Leadership

What is a leader? The spiritual writer Parker Palmer describes leaders as persons with an exceptional capacity to project onto others either their shadow or their light.

We know that those who are called to lead, especially but not exclusively in religious, human services, and not-for-profit organisation, are expected to bring a high level of
professional competence. They need to have knowledge of their field, administrative ability, awareness of cutting-edge trends, and skill in building and leading a team. They must be able to relate well to those who work in the organisation, those served by it, its donors, and civic officials.

But there is more to leadership, as Palmer’s description indicates. Leaders need to be connected with their inner selves; they need to pay attention to the Spirit at the core of their spirits. They need to be persons with deep spiritual foundations, at home with their spirituality.

In these times of profound change, those who accept the spiritual dimensions of leadership, whether lay, religious, or clergy, all their organisations to remember who they are and what their mission is, just as the prophets of old did. They strive to see and interpret events within a larger context of meaning. For those in the Christian tradition, that larger context is, of course, the story of God’s saving action, revealed in the history of Israel, embodied in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and continuing to flourish in the universe through the Spirit whom he gave us.

One Person’s Experience of Spiritual Leadership

When I began my term on the general council of my religious congregation, I knew that coming to terms with loss would be a major thing. Like most women’s congregations in the United States, our median age was increasing, our numbers were decreasing, and many of our ministries were changing or closing. As spiritual leaders, we would need to help our sisters move beyond denial, anger, fear and all the other faces of resistance, and accept our reality as an invitation to discover new life within a “spirituality of diminishment” as described by Joan Chittister, O.S.B.

My eight years in leadership became for me a personal journey to Emmaus. I found that my plans, goals, visions and hopes for the community were deeply challenged, not just from external forces, as I had expected, but from within my own spirit. I wrestled with feeling both over-responsible and inadequate as a leader. I found that I had to reshape my understanding of myself, others and God radically.

Leaders need to be connected with their inner selves; they need to pay attention to the Spirit at the core of their spirits

Again and again I asked, “What does all of this mean, for me and for my congregation? Where is God in it all?” I searched for a way of making sense of leadership as a Spirit-filled activity. Then, in a shadowy way, I began to sense that my search was linked to larger patterns and movements among us and beyond us.

At the same time several major studies of religious life in the United States concluded, not surprisingly, that in times of massive organisational transition such as the present, leaders play a critical role, and that the quality of leadership is perhaps the most significant predictor of a community’s viability. Gradually I came to see that my struggles were not just my own, and that, on several levels, they were signs of the Spirit’s nudging toward my own conversion of heart, toward the deeper renewal of my community and the larger communities of church and society which we served.

What have I learned about spiritual leadership? I sum up my learning in three statements, which are my foundational premises: First, that leadership is more about spirituality than about skills. It always calls us to go deeper into the mystery of conversion and transformation.

Second, that the journeys of transformation - personal, communal, and societal – are interwoven. The efforts of leaders to transform their world and to guide their communities
through the process of change are deeply interwoven with, and often mirror, the story of their own inner personal transformation. And vice versa. Spirit inhabits both inner and outer landscapes, and leaders need to attend to both.

Retelling this shadow side of your collective story can release the power of forgiveness, and free individuals to make their personal peace with the past

Third, that the journey of one who would be a spiritual leader is a perennial work in progress. What Ernest Hemingway said of writers is also true about leaders: “We are all apprentices in a craft where no one ever becomes a master.”

In the remaining part of this article, I offer my reflections on several aspects of the role of spiritual leaders. I wish to address my words directly to leaders, whom I invite into an imaginary conversation with me, in the presence of the Spirit.

Spiritual Leaders Hold the Community’s Story
As a leader, you know that your work always serves the community. In Catholic language, you share in the Spirit’s work of building up the Body of Christ.

You exercise leadership in the context of a tradition that you have received. The collective history of your organisation is a source of great strength, from which you will repeatedly drink as from a deep well.

You inspire your members to cherish the stories of those who have gone before you. You do this; not as an exercise in nostalgia, but rather as a confirmation that your group has a life larger than individuals, and its mission has a dynamism that has carried it through good times and hard times, with the help of God.

You also remind the group that its story is not all sweetness and light. It is shot through with human tragedies, mistakes, and sins. Retelling this shadow side of your collective story can release the power of forgiveness, and free individuals to make their personal peace with the past.

As leader, you hold in trust the deep story. You hold up this story like a mirror. You invite the group to claim it as the pattern of its most genuine identity. You invite each person to look deeply and discover his or her own part in it. And as you move through communal times of clarity, peace and joy, or grief, turmoil and doubt, the wisdom of the deep story can nourish you again and again; healing, encouraging and centring you.

But the organisation’s history is ongoing; its deep story continues to be written in the lives of today’s members. This too, the new chapter as well as the old, has to be part of the story that you interpret and tell.

Spiritual Leaders Try to see what is Really Going On
Everyone wants leaders with vision. Sometimes by vision, people really mean, “Predict the future. Read the signs and tell us what will happen to our group tomorrow, or next year.” You know how impossible this is. In your leadership role, you are called to see clearly and name truthfully what is before you and around you. You are called to “look reality in the face and also communicate hope” as the Leadership Conference of Women Religious put it in “Dimensions of Leadership.”

The spiritual leader constantly asks not only, “What is happening in me and in the organisation that I am called to lead?” but also the deeper questions, “What is really going on? What message is the Spirit of God writing in my journey, and in the ups and
downs of our organisation’s story?“ These questions are asked in times of crisis and diminishment, challenge and self-doubt, as well as in times of success and growth. As the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote: “The task is not so much to see what no one yet has seen, but to think what nobody yet has thought about that which everybody sees.”

Is this not what Jesus did? He saw possibilities where others saw dead ends; he saw human goodness where others saw outcasts. So in order to see what is really going on, you will need to learn to see with God’s eyes.

**Spiritual Leaders Tend the Whole Body**

A leader has to be attentive to the group’s incarnate reality, to discern how its spirit takes flesh, here and now, at this moment in its history. To do this, you as leader must first take seriously your own incarnate reality.

- Listen to your body. Trust its wisdom. Know what it feels like when you are in balance and harmony, when you are acting from a deep centre of energy and peace, and how that feels different from acting in driven and compulsive ways.
- Live the life you’ve been given. You have accepted the responsibility of leadership for a finite span of time. So let yourself be there. Acknowledge what you’ve left behind, grieve over it, but then get on with life. Apply your energy to the life you’ve been given, not to the one you wish you had.
- Know what you need to keep yourself healthy in body, mind, and spirit. Be faithful to keeping Sabbath time. Be disciplined about your own quest for spiritual, psychological and physical wholeness. The time you give to it is not a luxury; rather, it is of utmost significance for the group you lead.
- Do not try to carry the burden of leadership alone. Not even Moses was able to lead all by himself (see Exodus 18:18; Deuteronomy 1:12). Seek someone outside the organisation with whom you can share your concerns, frustrations, and questions. Find a trusted counsellor, spiritual director, or wisdom figure with no baggage or connections with your group, who can help you keep perspective on what is going on.

**Tending the Body also Means Tending the Life of the Community**

- You as the leader remind the group that it is truly one body, in the Pauline sense of the term. You balance the needs of its various members, foster healing, and channel the energies of all so the body works as one organism.
- You see to it that the organisation is aware of itself. You create a climate where information can flow freely. By expanding ways for people to shape the group’s dreams and decisions, you invite the whole body to become a community of learners, and help to demolish the myth of the leader as the expert who knows all the answers – a myth, which you already know, is false.
- You tend the body by discerning the Spirit’s movement in the life of the group, and in the signs of the times that challenge and stretch it. You encourage members to develop the gift of a discerning heart. You reflect back to the group the sometimes disjointed notes of its own self-understanding. By accepting your role as leader, the community gives you authority to perform this ministry of discernment, of truth-telling in love, on its behalf.

**Be Disciplined About Your Own Quest for Spiritual, Psychological and Physical Wholeness**

- You tend the life of the group by identifying members who carry its Spirit-life. I know the director of a mobile soup kitchen in a poor section of New York City. She could name, among the homeless persons whom she served, those known by everyone as wise,
grateful, patient, good listeners. Think about those in your organization who embody its spirit in tangible ways.

• Lastly, your role as a sort of spiritual director for the body makes you an advocate for healthy institutions. It is not secret that the institutional substructures of our society and of our churches are in serious trouble. But if we believe that God’s Spirit acts within us as a people, then institutions are the soil in which God’s Spirit plants seeds of community, and so leaders must pay attention to the spirituality of institutions.

Some years ago, I participated in a consultation on “The Spirituality of Trusteeship.” I was the only Roman Catholic; the 12 other women and men included business people, ministers and lay leaders from Christian, Orthodox, and Jewish faith traditions. All we had in common was that we had served on boards or as administrators in institutions both religious and secular, and we were people for whom faith mattered a lot.

For a week, at a Benedictine monastery, we talked, prayed, shared stories and faith, and drew on the expertise of our experience, trying to figure out why institutional life was in such crisis, and why the job of tending and nurturing organizations – the job of leadership – seemed to sap energy instead of sparking it.

In the statement, which we finally produced, we said that we believed in the power of boards and other governance groups to be transformational, and that such transformation begins with, of all things, the creation of community within the board. To help us reconnect with our deepest resources of spirit, or community, and of common purpose, we spoke of consciously adopted disciplines. We used the language of spirituality, not of organizational development, to describe those disciplines: discernment, listening, honesty, justice, love, and humility, letting the Spirit work through us.

We spoke of our belief that our common life is at a point of crisis. Though we weren’t sure we could continue to trust those institutions. Rather, we joined our voices to the many others calling for renewed attention to their transformative potential.

**Spiritual Leaders Foster Communal Connections**

With contemporary writers on organizations, you understand that group life, as well as the practice of leadership, is all about relationships. Listen to the poet David Whyte: “Whether it be the Berlin Wall, apartheid, the…old coercive Soviet system, or our own…old coercive business systems, it seems that any foundations not now built on the realities of human relationship are being swept away by the forces of our time”.

In a world of broken connections, you witness that relationships are key. You are committed to building community as an antidote to “separatism, exploitation and vengeance,” as the psychologist and religious leader Donna Markham, O.P., explains:

> Love in organizations, then, is the most potent source of power we have available.
>
> Leadership must be grounded in the capacity to stand in relationship, to foster connections across differences, to engage in dialogue in service of building global communion. Leaders who squander resources, use bully tactics, refuse dialogue, (and) devalue the vulnerable...are not only dangerous; they are acting in reckless violation of an emergent global ethic that reflects the simple mandate of the Golden Rule...People who cannot relate should not be in leadership today. It is too dangerous to our survival...Lack of connection is the breeding ground for violence.

This attitude presupposes an understanding of power that differs radically from the world’s prevailing view. It reflects the Gospel understanding of leadership as self-giving
service, power used on behalf of the powerless and vulnerable. Saints Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, founders of my congregation’s spiritual tradition, understood this notion of power as service when they gave the name of “Sister Servant” to the local community leader.

Jesus fully possessed the power of the Spirit, gift of his Abba. Under the influence of that power, he healed, set free, empowered, raised up, and washed feet. What other leader, president, ruler, or head of state uses power this way?

As a spiritual leader following the example of Jesus, you seek to create and foster an atmosphere built on the power of love. Listen to organizational theorist Margaret Wheatley:

“What gives power its charge, positive or negative, is the quality of relationships. Those who relate through coercion, or from disregard for the other person, create negative energy. Those who relate to others and who see others in their fullness create positive energy. Love in organizations, then, is the most potent source of power we have available.”

(Cited in Bennett Sims, Servanthood: Leadership for the Third Millennium.)

Religious Life and Leadership

Several years ago, I was part of a group that produced “Dimensions of Leadership” for women religious leaders in the United States. We identified three main dimensions – symbolic/meaning-making, relational, and organizational/structural – and abilities essential in each of them.

Spiritual leaders, we noted, are able to “connect the richness of the inner world with the significant challenges and movements of a given time.” They give priority to “developing and animating relational skills in themselves and others.” And they are able to recognize a group’s “culture and climate” and create “learning organizations.” All of these skills are Spirit-given and Spirit-led; all of them flow from and contribute to the leader’s spirituality.

Part of the mission of religious life and its leaders today, I believe, is to respond to our world’s profound hunger for spirituality and meaning. The institution of religious life has always witnessed to the presence of the Spirit in the midst of the most frightening chaos within and without, and to the peace that comes with giving oneself totally to the passionate search for wisdom, for God, even though that may lead through times of confusion and unknowing.

As those who hold their community’s story, religious leaders seek to channel, boldly and wisely, the profound Spirit-energies that gave birth to their congregations. As those who try to see with God’s eyes, they hope to summon the creative imagination that can dig deep underneath the multiple poverties of the world, the church, and their congregations, to uncover the abundance hidden there.

As those who are attentive to the whole body, religious leaders desire to reveal God’s transforming grace, hidden in unlikely places and faces. As those who have a passion for relationships and connections, they commit themselves to be relentless agents of reconciliation and peace, called to give and receive forgiveness.

Conclusion

Whether lay or religious, Spirit-led leaders can be a rich resource for those who are seeking to connect inner and outer worlds. In conclusion, I return to my belief that there are intimate connections between the processes by which persons, communities and societies are transformed. I ask these questions of leaders:
• What wisdom can you learn from your personal experiences of transformation and conversion?
• How might the lessons you learn from your inner journey help you to make sense of the dynamics of dying and rising in your organization and in the larger world, and vice versa?
• How much do religious leaders bring the inner world of their personal transformation into the outer world of influencing society?
• As a spiritual leader, how do you hold and tell the community’s story?
• How do you try to see the big picture, with God’s vision?
• How do you pay attention to the body that is yours and the body that you serve?
• How do you foster connections and relationships?

The foundress of the Sisters of Charity in the United States, Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, led her community with vision, courage, and caring from 1809 to 1821. In the uncertainties of her time, as she sought to keep her Sisters focused on God and on their mission, she spoke often of the need to “meet our grace” in every circumstance, and to “keep well to…the grace of the moment.”

As she faced the challenges of leadership, she gave herself to God, in trust that God would use her gifts and limitations. May her gentle advice sustain all who seek to grow in spiritual leadership: “Go to (God) with faith, love and confidence—he will help. Fill yourself with his Spirit and He himself will govern.”

Recommended Reading


Sister Regina Bechtle, S.C., is a theologian, spiritual director, retreat director and writer. Currently she develops resources to promote the spirituality and heritage of Charity. She has a Ph.D. in theology from Fordham. Her reflections are based on her experience as a member of her congregation’s leadership team and her work with religious leaders and their communities.

2. Living the truths of the Spirit by Edith Hamilton

*The truths of the spirit are proved not by reasoning about them, or finding explanation of them, but only by acting upon them.*

*Their life is dependent upon what we do about them.*

*Mercy, gentleness, forgiveness, patience;*

*If we do not show them they will cease to be.*

*Upon us depends the reality of God here on Earth today.*

*Edith Hamilton (1867 - 1963)*
Welcome

SESSION 4
SESSION 4: WELCOME

Extract from Catching Fire

One of the most compelling features of the early Christian communities was their sense of mutuality and genuine welcome to all. Hospitality and generosity go hand in hand, and certainly these early communities had a long and deep tradition of welcome in the Jewish scriptures. ‘Welcoming the stranger’ was rewarded beyond measure in the great stories of the Hebrew scriptures, such as Abraham and Sara. In the gospels, Jesus’ open welcome to all, including society’s strangers – the tax collectors and sinners, women and the sick – challenged the very structure of society.

It is noteworthy that the great spiritual documents in Western civilization all give priority to this most fundamental of things – welcome. It is acknowledgement that the practice of respectful attentiveness in these small moments of human encounter develops a habit of gratitude and grace that is a hallmark of the Holy, and the pathway to God.

Today, the practice of welcome is still very challenging for us, because still it is the call to be attentive to the daily encounters we have with other staff, with parents and with children, and at the same time in the wider world to reach out to the marginalized, the sick, the outcast and the hurting.

1. The teacher’s calling: “Facing Ourselves Together,” by Gloria Durka

   … when you come to think about it, you find that one of the two lands of order, the conscious and the unconscious order, only one is real. It’s the order in the deep hidden places … the true order in the depths….the “still centre.”

   (Sylvia Ashton-Warner)

The call to teach is embedded in mystery. The more we engage with our student as persons, the more we affirm our own incompleteness. We become more aware of spaces still to be explored, desires still to be uncovered, and possibilities still to be opened. For many of us, our sense of incompleteness is heightened by how we handle our time and our vulnerability.

Time. Soon after we first answer our calling to be teachers, we are confronted with the dilemma of how to spend our time. Some of us have learned to hoard time as miser hoards money. There just never seems to be enough time to do what needs to be done. We are faced with making priorities for ourselves: family responsibilities, personal needs, and demands of friendship, professional tasks. Some of us feel the pressure to carefully account for every moment. Is it all right to splurge now and then to spend an afternoon with friends? To take time out to play with our own children? To try out some new recipes? To read a novel or see a play? Those who are time hoarders will recognize these dilemmas. Always lurking in the backs of our minds is the concern about keeping up with our fields of teaching. We may feel forever behind with trying to keep up with professional reading or attending workshops and seminars, and therefore think of ourselves as failing in our duty. There is just so much to do.

Vulnerability. No matter what age group we teach, we are always “on,” always exposed to others. We are scrutinized and judged daily by all the students we teach. This can be very draining. We can grow weary of performing, entertaining, stimulating and filling up others’ emptiness. We can tire of trying to stimulate, encourage, comfort and discipline our students. But if we open our hearts to the wisdom of experience, we can have fewer
such days. We can come to realize that students must learn and achieve for themselves, not to please their teachers. There will always be those who do not meet our standards, and it takes quite a bit of humility to admit this. Our concern for our students does not excuse us from the obligation to exercise our authority, evaluate student progress and attend to the standards set by the broader community, as well as nurture students in an atmosphere of warmth and understanding. By so doing, teachers rediscovers the value of care. We reach back to our own experiences of caring and being cared for, as Nel Noddings writes, we embrace the ideal of nurture through “dialogue, practice and confirmation.” How does this process look?

Dialogue is difficult because it requires rethinking our notion of authority. It does not mean that we surrender it. The teacher cannot pretend to be the same as the student. The teacher is the one who is responsible for designing the environment to make teaching and learning possible. Dialogue requires a conversation between the content or curriculum and the students’ needs. It means allowing their problems and questions to deepen within them and then helping them to express them even if it means that some tension might result. We should not forget that tension can be creative.

Practice implies a climate of hospitality in which genuine conversations can take place. Henri Nouwen complained that the classroom is often an inhospitable place, and he calls for the “creation of a space where students can enter into a fearless communication with each other and allow their respective life experiences to be their primary and most valuable source of growth and maturation.” Students are allowed to ask questions and to think creatively about the content. Perhaps some of us can recall how it felt when we asked a question that was ignored, or when we were told to put our hand down when we were poised to ask a question. While we as teachers have objectives and goals, the students have needs that must be addressed. The burden is on us to prepare our material as well as possible, deliver it as efficiently and creatively as possible, yet be willing to adjust our methods and materials to the unique setting in which we are teaching. We cannot teach the same way year after year. Recall the joke in the question, “Do you have twenty years of experience, or one year of experience repeated twenty times?” Our practice of teaching requires fresh style.

Confirmation is what results from an environment of hospitality in which dialogue is practised. It is cyclic. The stronger and more confident students become, the braver they are to take risks and try things for which they had never had the courage. They can tap their own resources. It is interesting that as the students are confirmed, so are we as teachers. When our students listen to us attentively, give us verbal and nonverbal support or a word of thanks, we are made bolder and we try harder. The song from The King and I says it well:

It’s a very old saying
But it’s a true and honest thought
That if you are a teacher
By your students you’ll be taught.

Oscar Hammerstein, “Getting to Know You” (paraphrased)
2. The Real Expression of our Faith by Joan Chittester, and including Scripture passages

The real expression of our faith belief is how we live as community.

Only when our senses are sharpened, to hear and respond to the cries of those hurting and struggling and to see and respond to the plight of the broken, can we claim to be on the same path as the compassionate Christ. (J. Chittister).

Rejoice with others when they rejoice, and be sad with those in sorrow. Give the same consideration to all others alike. As much as possible, and to the utmost of your ability, be at peace with everyone.
Romans 12:15,16a, 18

When we fail to care, it can’t be hidden for very long.
When we’re not genuine, it’s transparent.
(J. Chittister).

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.
Ephesians 4:2

Make time each day to avoid transparency.
Make time each day to listen and to be with the people whom God has placed you with.
Make time each day to be the face of the compassionate Christ.
(J. Chittister).

Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.
1 Peter 3:8
SESSION 5: RITUAL

Extract from Catching Fire

Ritual is fundamental to the meaning – making of human beings and, because of this, is common to both ‘secular’ and ‘sacred’ worlds. Words, actions and symbols are used in a way that requires little or no explanation to those participating because they speak so clearly to a shared ‘knowing’. In the Catholic tradition, liturgy – the formal prayer of the church – developed out of the rituals of the early Christian communities who gathered together to remember, to break bread and to celebrate the living reality of Jesus.

There is a ritual pattern common to most gatherings whether they be secular (e.g. birthday parties, sporting events) or sacred (liturgies of the Church, prayer rituals and devotions). The elements of this pattern are: we gather; we listen; we respond; we go forth. All the official liturgies of the church – including the Eucharist, the other sacraments and the Liturgy of the Hours – have a gathering rite, proclamation of scripture; response in spoken word, song or ritual action, and a concluding rite that sends us forth. Prayer rituals and other celebrations, which allow for more flexibility in structure and style also follow this pattern.

All Catholic ritual is founded on an incarnational understanding of God and the belief in the sacramentality of all things. That God is revealed in the world and in a particular and powerful way through Jesus Christ means that God is revealed and encountered in the real and tangible moments of everyday life. The seven sacraments name and celebrate moments that are key points of this divine encounter.

The power of ritual in our Catholic Christian tradition invites us into a deeper reality that engages all our senses – head, heart and hands – in a way that turns the ordinary into the extraordinary. When we understand this, we cannot help but see the world and each other with eyes of reverence.

1. The Christian Year – What does it mean to celebrate it?

The Christian year tells a story. We begin with Advent, awaiting the birth of Christ, then make our way through Christmas, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, the Ascension and Pentecost, until we get to the end of the year, which looks forward to the end of time, the final coming of Christ and the Kingdom of God. We are invited to find ourselves inside this story. This book follows the evolution of this drama and offers material for us to celebrate its seasons.

What does it mean to live within this story? It tells us two things: who we are and what we hope for. First of all, then, who we are: one of the ways in which we understand ourselves is by telling stories about ourselves and other people. When we come home at night after a day’s work, we tell stories of what we have done and whom we have seen. We tell stories of our childhood and of our friendships. We tell stories of our holidays and school days. All these stories explore and express our identity.

There are also stories that explore the identity that we share with larger groups, as members of a family, tribe or nation, as a supporter of a football club or a pupil of a school. I discover who I am by exploring who ‘we’ are. The only prize that I ever won at school was called, I think, Little Arthur’s History of England. I was very proud of this prize, although I must admit that everyone in the class won a prize too! This history of England was intended to give me a sense of who we are as English people. It mainly told how we
went around killing lots of other people, although I hardly noticed that at the time. But we carry with us lots of other stories: stories of our ancestors that tell us what it means to belong to this family, or stories of the wonderful victories of Newcastle United (founded by the Dominicans!), which tell us what it means to belong to the community of their supporters. Part of being a Dominican is that I learn stories about the foundation of the Order, and of what we have done through the centuries.

Every year, we live through the drama, which is the Christian year, from waiting for Christ to be born, until we finish with the Feast of Christ the King. To live within this story is to express and explore an identity. On one level it is obvious that this is the identity of being Christian rather than, for example, Muslim. They celebrate Ramadan and we celebrate Lent. You can spot some Christians on Ash Wednesday by the smudge of ash on their foreheads. This shows that they are taking part in the annual cycle of feasts and fasts that belong to the Christian life. One used to be able to spot Catholics because we always had fish on Fridays.

But the Christian story is an odd one, because it is not fundamentally about being a Christian but about being human. The story that we re-enact each year points us not towards some cosy future in which all Christians will be gathered together around Christ, but towards the Kingdom in which all of humanity will be reconciled and united. To be a Christian is to claim that one’s ultimate identity is to be found only in unity with the whole of the rest of humanity, when in Christ all divisions have been destroyed. He is the one in whom ‘all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross’ (Colossians 1:19f). When, as a child, I became absorbed in Little Arthur’s History of England, I was being initiated into an identity that marked me out from other people. I was English and so not French or German or American. But to live within the rhythm of the Christian story should not give me an identity which is exclusive – not Muslim, or Buddhist. It invites me beyond all exclusive identities. It tells me that we cannot flourish fully and be properly ourselves outside the Kingdom, in which all injustice and suffering and inequality will be over. Herbert McCabe OP asserts that ‘baptism is not the sacrament of the membership of the Church, it is membership of the Church; it is the sacrament of membership of humanity.’

Stories tell us where we belong and what our home is like. Stories of England or India or Zimbabwe tell people that this is where they are at home. It is interesting that the story that we live every year as Christians has its roots in the Jewish story of the Exodus, which told of how the Hebrews were summoned by God out of slavery in Egypt to worship him in freedom on Mount Sinai. God then led them to the Promised Land, flowing with milk and honey. This was the story that Jesus remembered and celebrated with his disciples as they gathered together in the upper room on the night before he was brutally killed. They celebrated the Passover, the story of liberation and homecoming. But then Jesus took bread, blessed it and broke it and gave it to them saying, ‘This is my body, given for you.’ And so with the wine. This is the core of our Christian story, and tells of the homecoming of all humanity, the promise that in Christ all conflict and rivalry and hatred will be finished. So to be a Christian is to have an odd sort of identity. On one level, it is an exclusive identity. If one is a Christian then one is not an atheist or a Hindu. But on another level, it is an identity, which points one beyond all exclusions, to a home, which we cannot yet imagine or understand, as a citizen of the Kingdom.
The seed, from which the Christian year grew, then, was the memory of the events, which spanned Maundy Thursday and Easter Sunday. During the early centuries the story began to expand backwards and forwards to cover the whole year. In the early fourth century it spread backwards to include Lent, which was originally the time during which converts prepared themselves to enter the community by baptism during the Easter Vigil. And it spread forward, with the Easter season continuing until Pentecost. In this Easter time it was forbidden for Christians to kneel down or to fast. We had to stand up to show that God had raised us to our feet and will raise us up after death. And we feasted to celebrate our redemption. Then in the mid-fourth century we see the emergence of Christmas, with Advent being added in the sixth century. The story gradually evolved so as to explore more deeply who we are and what we hope for.

Each year we live through this long story. It stretches open our little identities, as English or Irish, as followers of this football team or that band, and points towards a larger identity which is beyond words, which is to be a member of the whole of humanity in Christ. No matter what is going on in our personal and family lives, Advent comes and we begin to wait for the birth of Christ. It has a rhythm that may not always chime in with what we are feeling at that moment. On some Good Fridays we may be filled with happiness for some reason: Newcastle United has won a match, the sun is shining and we shall be meeting someone we love at the end of the day. And yet this day in the year summons us to sorrow. On Easter Day the Church summons us to rejoice, but we may be feeling miserable. Notoriously Christmas is a time when millions of people feel depressed.

So what is the point of our lives being shaped by this Christian year, with its rhythm of anticipation and celebrations, mourning and rejoicing? It reminds us that we belong with people who are different from us, whom we do not even know and yet who are our brothers and sisters in God. For some of the poorest, it is always Good Friday. Millions are crucified by debt and poverty. On Good Friday we share their desolation. For if they are dying then so are we, for they are flesh of our flesh. On Easter we are invited to rejoice, even if our lives are sad for some reason. We rejoice with the whole community, which celebrates the conquest of death and injustice.

Following the story of Christ’s life takes us through every possible emotion, from desolation to exultation. It stretches open our hearts and minds to identify with people who live all these moments now. Christ now is arrested unjustly and tortured by the police and soldiers all over the world. Christ today has his head covered with plastic bags and is beaten on his feet in torture cells everywhere. Christ is humiliated and mocked, and dies in millions of people. Christ today rises from the dead, in millions of small victories over injustice. Our story is his story. His story is ours. The Christian year stretches us open to all humanity, with its suffering and flourishing. Be celebrating the drama every year our own personal and private stories are taken into the story of humanity.

The mission of Christian Aid and CAFOD is to work for a world in which poverty and injustice will be over and in which the dignity of every human being will be respected. This is about more than economics. It is about helping a world to emerge in which who we are and what it means to be human will be visible. If the humanity of any of our brothers and sisters on this planet is hidden or destroyed, then humanity itself is wounded. So making our way through the cycle of the Christian year, making all its seasons, is a reaching out to discover who we are with each other in Christ.
We celebrate this year. The word ‘celebrate’ comes from the same root as ‘celebrity’. To celebrate is to rejoice in, to pay honour to. We live in a culture of celebrity. Surveys have shown that the highest aspiration of the young in both Europe and the United States is to become a celebrity. To be a celebrity is of course, as it is often said to be famous for being famous! But being famous is a sort of peak of existence. To be seen on the television is to really exist, to matter. This desire for fame has always existed. When St Augustine was a young man, he and his fellow young Africans longed ‘to live for ever in the mouths of the people’. But celebrities are puffed up for a moment, and then deflated by the media that gave them existence. Most of the six billion people on this planet will not be known for a few miles from where they are born and die. The vast majority of people live and die virtually in oblivion.

We celebrate the Christian year. And that means that we celebrate something deeper than celebrity. We celebrate the God whose memory embraces everyone and who never forgets. Inside this vast story sweeping from creation to the Kingdom, there is a space for all the little stories of the small people who are easily overlooked. In the Gospels we see Jesus meeting lepers, whom people wished to forget, and widows with their mites, whom they would never have noticed. We celebrate that you do not have to be a celebrity to matter, for in this story of God’s friendship with humanity, no one is too insignificant, for God Jesus said, ‘Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me.’

This book is supposed to be a resource for the celebration of the Christian year. And one way that it does that is to include as often as possible the stories of those who are often unnoticed or ignored. The celebration of the Christian year honours those who are not famous, who have no adulation, and whose memories are not cherished. We hear their stories, and are offered the possibility of praying with their prayers. The book is full of their names, from all over the globe.

In Natal, one of my brethren, Philippe Denis, runs a project for AIDS orphans. Often these children lose both their parents. They grow up with no memories of their ancestors, and so no knowledge of who they are. Philippe helps them to make memory boxes for keeping photos, letters, bits of clothing: anything that preserves a memory of those who gave birth to them. This means that they have some sign of their identity, of their roots in the past. They have a sense of who they are, to which they can cling in this uncertain world. But humanity needs its memory boxes too. They have their part in the story of humanity that we celebrate. In this book we offer the prayers and reflections of people who come from all parts of the globe. When we prepare meetings or worship to celebrate the seasons of the Christian year, then we will be able to hear their voices too. Our own communities will be stretched open to hear the voices of our unknown brothers and sisters. We may be touched by a glimpse of the spaciousness of the Kingdom.

The second thing that this story of the Christian year does is to give us hope. Eight million people a year die of poverty; millions are suffering from malnutrition, AIDS and malaria. Unjust economic structures bring increasing wealth to some and poverty to others. Our planet is threatened by ecological disaster. The challenges are so great that we might feel tempted to give up and join the ‘now generations’: eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we shall die.

We live in a time in which many people have lost hope for the future. This does not mean that they are miserable or depressed all the time. It is just that at the beginning of the third millennium we have fewer shared dreams for the future of humanity. Oliver Bennett of Warwick University wrote a book called Cultural Pessimism: Narratives of Decline in
the Postmodern World. He argues that with the increasing inequalities of our world, the spread of AIDS, growing violence in the inner city, the diffusion of criminal networks, we are suffering from a collective depression. Gone are the dreams of the 1960s, when everything seemed possible. Faced with the future, we have no good story to tell. Many people have ceased to dream of how we can make the world a better place for everyone, and tend to concentrate on what we can do for ourselves. Progress has been privatised.

There are today two stories that are often told about the future of humanity. The first is of ecological disaster and the second is of a war on terrorism. Neither of these promises anything for us and our children. The leaders of the rich nations, especially the United States, seem to lack the political will to confront pollution, and the war on terrorism seems to hold out the prospect of endless violence. What could ever count as winging it? Sir Martin Rees, the President of the Royal Society, recently published a book called Our Final Century? Will the Human Race Survive the Twenty-first Century?

In the face of this temptation to despair, what is the hope that our Christian story offers? Does it tell us what is going to happen? Can we read the Bible and have a special knowledge of what is around the corner? I do not believe so. People have always tried to read the Book of Revelation as giving us hidden clues as to what is imminent, but it never turns out as they expect. In every generation people have examined the numbers and declared that ‘the end is nigh’, and they have always turned out to be wrong. I do not think that the Bible should be read as coded history. We do believe that God will be faithful to humanity, and that we shall ultimately find peace and flourishing in God. Human history will not turn out ultimately to be a dead end. The Christian story promises us the final triumph of meaning over absurdity, but it gives us no account of how this will happen. It is a story of hope, but it does not say how that hope will be realised in history.

The twentieth century was crucified by ideologies that knew the road map to paradise. Fascism, Nazism, Communism, and even to a certain extent, raw neo-liberal Capitalism, knew the way to the future, and forced human beings to march towards it in accordance with their plans. They knew the story and wanted humanity to conform to it. And so, tens of millions of people were sacrificed on the altars of their ideologies.

I cannot forget my visit to the Tuol Sleng genocide centre in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Tens of thousands of people were brought here to be interrogated and killed. The walls are lined with thousands of photographs of those whose lives ended here. Some of them look at the camera with fear, some sullenly: some smile hesitantly, as if they hoped that a smile might earn a few more days of life. Those who ran the centre kept meticulous records, which they had no time to destroy when the Pol Pot regime finally fell. There are signs, which command silence. And everyone was silenced. This is what happens when one tries to force humanity to conform to a road map. The road leads to the Killing Fields. In July 2004, I visited Auschwitz for the first time. At the entrance there is a map with railway lines that covered the whole of Europe, from Vichy France to the Ukraine, from Norway to Greece. All the lines converged at the gas chambers. These were literally the end of the line. Human technological efficiency devoured the lives of millions, as it tried to force its Paradise on humanity.

As we begin this third millennium, we Christians have a story that does give us hope and which we re-enact every year. But it does not do this by presenting us with a road map. This is as well, since after the most destructive century in human history, we are naturally distrustful of anyone who proposes a plan for the future. How then does our story offer hope?
The nuclear seed of the Christian story, from which the whole story germinated, is that of the last three days of the life of Jesus. On the night before he died, he gathered his disciples together for the Last Supper. Already his death was plotted, and was on the way to being accomplished. As he celebrated the Last Supper, the soldiers were on their way. But at the table he made a sign. He took bread, blessed it, shared it with the disciples and said, ‘This is my body, given for you.’ And so with the wine, poured out for many.

The Last Supper is the time when the disciples lost any story to tell of the future. They had been sustained on their way to Jerusalem by stories of military victory, of Jesus being installed as Messiah, and no doubt they hoped that they would all get top jobs in the new regime. But on that night it was clear that all that they could see ahead of them was disaster, failure, or dead end. At that moment Jesus did not offer an alternative story of the future. He did not appeal to Plan B. He did not say, ‘Well, crucifixion is just a temporary setback. On Easter Sunday, I will rise from the dead and we shall carry on as before.’ He grasped this moment of defeat and made of it a sign of hope. The paradox at the heart of Christianity is that its founding story looks back to when there was no story to tell of the future. Its hope looks back to the moment when there was no hope. All we were given was a sign.

The Last Supper is the clash between two sorts of power. There is the power of the political and religious authorities. These are the strong and brutal powers of money and armies, which will take Jesus captive and destroy him. In the face of their threat, Jesus does not reply with brutal force. He is the lamb who is taken away to be slaughtered. Instead he replies with a sign. He takes the Jewish sign of the Passover, of the exodus from bondage in Egypt, and makes of it a sign of our liberation from all that can imprison us and destroy us. This is a sign offered in the face of death. It does not tell us the story of what will happen afterwards, but it speaks of hope. When everything is falling apart, it speaks of our coming home.

I was in Rwanda during the early years leading up to the genocide when violence was beginning to break out all over the country. One day four of us decided to go north to visit the Dominican sisters who were serving the refugees caught up in the midst of war. The soldiers had barricaded the road going north and warned us not to go any further because the country was on fire, but we did not realise how serious it was and set off. We were frequently stopped, hauled out of the car by groups of masked and armed rebels, and had to talk our way through. We visited a refugee camp with tens of thousands of people living in squalor under plastic sheets. We went to a hospital filled with young children whose limbs had been blown off. I shall forever remember one young lad who had lost his legs, an arm and an eye, and his father who was sitting by the bed weeping. That evening we went back to the simple hut where our sisters lived. We celebrated the Eucharist. After the gospel, I was sure I was supposed to speak some encouraging words of hope. But what was there to say? But there was a sign that we had been given. This sign spoke of that for which we had no words. We had a memory of what Jesus had done in the face of death, when all had seemed without purpose.

The Christian year grows out of the seed of the story of those last three days. As I wrote above, it was extended backwards, to the birth of Jesus, to our waiting for that birth, and ultimately to the beginning of creation. It also reached forward to Pentecost, and ultimately to the coming of the Kingdom. The story was stretched backward and forward so that we could all find ourselves within its hope. The story was extended from those compact and dramatic last three days to take in all sorts of events. It made it a roomy
story, with lots of space. We see Jesus meeting prostitutes, calling disciples, telling parables, healing the sick, arguing with Pharisees. We are taken back to Christ’s birth and the expectant pregnancy of his mother. And it reaches forward to include our own time as we await the Kingdom. This was so that we can find all the dramas of our lives inside it, as children, as expectant parents, as sick and hurt, as curious and challenged by the words of this man. And our time too is embraced in the time between Pentecost and the end. Whatever pain or suffering or joy we may experience, it is somewhere there in that story. Whatever experiences we may have, they have their place in the drama of the Christian year. They are embraced and we are carried by the surge of the narrative onwards. For the now generation, any moment is absolute. If we are sorrowful, then the sorrow is absolute, because this is the only moment that there is. To live within this story is to find ourselves, whatever happens, moving towards the Kingdom. This story opens up a future in which things need not be as they are.

In Animal Dreams by Barbara Kingsolver, we are told how to live in hope:
‘Codi, here’s what I have decided: the very least that you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. And the most that you can do is to live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof … right now I am living in that hope, running down its hallway and touching the walls on both sides. I can’t tell you how good it feels.’

The Christian story is one inside which we can live, and run down its passages, touching the walls on both sides. Hope is not just for what is in the future. Our story makes it the atmosphere we breathe now. It remains a story that does not give us the false and dangerous assurance of the road map. It gives us hope but it does not tell us how that hope will be fulfilled. When we discuss debt relief, aid programmes, different economic theories, then as Christians we have no privileged information. We have to join in the debate with everyone else, arguing our corner. There is no special Christian political programme or economic theory. There are politics and economics that we can reject as unchristian, but none which can claim our exclusive allegiance. We have to struggle with the facts and the argument, just like everyone else.

This Christian story embodies what is fundamental to our identity. We are citizens of the Kingdom. This is a more fundamental identity than any we could ever receive from any nation or city or ethnic group. But the gospel does not tell us how we are to bring about a society which realises that promised unity. The annual cycle of the liturgical year is a sign but not a manifesto. I can tell the story of England, which makes sense of what it means for me to be English. I cannot yet tell the story of humanity and know the fullness of what it means to be human. The story of the Christian year is a sort of sign of that. Its full meaning lies ahead.

We live that cycle every year. We triumphantly arrive at the end with the Feast of Christ the King, awaiting Christ’s coming at the end of time. But then we are taken right back to the beginning, and once again we are in Advent, waiting for Christ to come as a child. And we might be forgiven if sometimes we wonder whether it gets us anywhere. It may seem like a sort of liturgical snakes and ladders. Just when we are attaining the goal, then we slide back down to the beginning again. Might we not be tempted to think that this endless repetition means that we are going around in circles, wandering around in the desert for year after year, like the Israelites after the escape from Egypt? What is the point of beginning yet again?
We celebrate the Christian year. And celebration is more than just attending meetings or fulfilling rituals. Celebration implies song and joy; these look beyond the present moment to give us a tiny glimpse of the Kingdom already. I was in Kinshasa, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, when the rebels surrounded the city. It looked as if the city might fall at any moment. The tension was terrible. And then we went to celebrate the Eucharist, and in Africa one sees what celebration really means. Before we even arrived at the altar everyone was dancing. We might have been in the midst of war but for a moment there was a glimpse of God’s promise, the joy of the Kingdom. Celebration gives us hope.

The earliest prayers in our tradition are the Psalms and these are songs. In these songs the Israelites recounted everything: their victories and their defeats, their anguish and fear, their sorrow and their joys. Everything that is human can be found in these songs, even violence and neurosis, and yet nearly every psalm makes its way beyond the darkness into the light. And this is right because song and music are perhaps the ultimate expression of hope. Music is strong enough to carry within itself even despair, and transcend it. Karl Barth said of Mozart’s music that it was a great ‘no’ embraced by the resounding ‘yes’. The Psalms reach beyond all that is destructive in human beings towards a hope, which is beyond words, and sustained only by music and metaphor. In Psalm 57, for example, the psalmist is obviously having a tough time. Everyone is out to get him or her: ‘I lie in the midst of lions that greedily devour the sons of men; their teeth are spears and arrows, their tongues sharp swords.’ But all this pain is transformed into music that overcomes the night: ‘I will sing and make melody. Awake my soul! Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn.’

Faced with the suffering and injustice of this world, we are sustained in our hope by songs that speak a hope, which is beyond words. It is a hope that, as Zechariah sings, gives ‘light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death’ (Luke 1:79). We celebrate the Christian year, rather than just recounting it, because it is a celebration that embodies hope. And so this book contains songs too, for every season, to carry us onwards through its narrative of liberation, even when no future is in sight. It is to help you celebrate.

The cycle of the Christian year has sometimes in the past been a source of division between Christians. Some denominations at the time of the Reformation banned the celebration of even Christmas and Easter because they were considered to be superstitious. During the centuries, we can give thanks that these hostilities have been largely overcome. And it is a sign of hope that this book brings together, for the celebration of the liturgical seasons, Christians from every Church. If we can hear each other’s hope and love, each other’s songs, then we shall be drawn together and Christianity will better fulfil its vocation, to be a sign of the unity of all humanity in the Kingdom.

2. “Deep Listening”, by John Fox

When someone deeply listens to you
It is like holding out a dented cup you have had since childhood
And watching it fill up with cold fresh water.
When it balances on the top of the rim
You are understood.
When it overflows and touches your skin
You are loved.
When someone deeply listens to you
The room where you stay starts a new life
And the place where you wrote your first poem
Begins to blow in your mind’s eye.
It’s as if gold has been discovered.
When someone deeply listens to you
Your bare feet are on the earth
And the beloved land that seemed distant
Is now at home within you.

3. Light a Candle
I light a candle
I say a prayer
I light a candle in Your Name.
For the tender moments of teaching
For the energy for deep new learning
For the fire of vocation’s calling
I light a candle in Your Name.
Against the chill of the world’s dark troubles
In the face of sadness here among us
For my heart’s longing in the night
I light a candle in Your Name.
To signal hope for all that might be
To whisper thanks for all that is
To reflect the Love I’ll carry with me
I light a candle in Your Name.
I light a candle
I say a prayer
I light a candle in Your Name.
SESSION 6: JOURNEY

Extract from Catching Fire

Our understanding of followers or believers being called the ‘people of God’ has its roots in the Old Testament – itself the story or narrative of the journey of a believing people – the Israelites – in their relationship with God. It has three key elements: Faith, kinship and call.

Behind the events and stories in the Old Testament, there is the movement in faith of individuals and a people. It is a narrative of growing in faith. The New Testament follows as the breaking open in faith of the reality of God’s love in the being and action of Jesus Christ. There is a sense of the growing maturity of understanding that culminated in the explosive reality of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

In this journey of faith, the understanding that we only make this journey in community – in kinship with each other – is central to the Catholic tradition. We do not go the journey alone; in fact, we need each other to know our own deepest truth in God.

The call to return to God is woven through all the scriptures. It was Jesus’ call to us too, and it remains our call today. It is no less difficult, nor less compelling than it ever was. In answering that call we remember that we are part of a larger company of travellers that stretches back in time and into the future encompassing the great communion of saints and faithful. We are the people of God, called to find our place in the wider Church as we journey in community, in faith.

1. Change Challenges a Faith Review by Eric Hodgens (19 March 201

This talk was given to the Catholic Religious of Victoria Symposium on School Governance.

Three massive changes are challenging our Faith: changes in western culture, in the Australian Catholic sub-culture and in the Church.

Changes in Western Culture.

Western culture has experienced changes over the last few centuries. These include: the renaissance of the 16th century, the scientific revolution led by Isaac Newton, the enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the evolutionary discoveries of Charles Darwin, the psychology of Freud, Einstein’s theory of relativity, astronomy discoveries including the Big Bang. Over the same period history changed from story telling to a discipline where facts needed to be quantified and verified and sources listed. This changed historical discourse from being a work of the imagination more to being factual reportage and intellectual interpretation. Science and technology have created an explosion of knowledge. The growth of universal education and the expansion of wealth have led to a world with a new set of presumptions and certainties. The whole social order has moved from that of a small privileged class with a large under class to one of middle class privilege and wealth. The American and the French revolutions are key watershed moments in replacing monarchy and nobility with liberal democracy. Authority has moved from the king to the people.

Implications.

The imaginative world of the catechism is no longer credible. The imaginative world of today’s younger generation does not include a factual heaven and hell. Serving God in the sense of keeping his revealed law implies a down from the top authority which sits
uncomfortably with a democratic principle that authority comes from a consensus of the populace. The authority of a clerical hierarchy, which communicates and validates the truth of God’s revelation and God’s law does not fit into their imaginative cosmos. The older generation has been able to flip between the old imaginative world and the new. I suggest that the old cosmos is now simply fanciful for the younger generations.

Changes in Australian Catholic Sub-culture.

Mid 20th century Catholic identity in Australia was marked by a strong sense of affiliation in a majority of Catholics. This showed in strong support for parish life and for the Catholic school. The principal and staff were either professional religious or strongly practising Catholics. The students were Catholic with few exceptions. A majority of the school families were practising Catholics – regular at Mass and the sacraments. The schools included religious practice in the official curriculum. They participated in the initiation of students into the sacraments of Eucharist, Penance and Confirmation. Catholic doctrinal and moral catechesis was a major item in the curriculum. Evangelisation was taken as having already happened. The schools could rightly be described as confessional schools.

The scene is very different today. While the schools are still highly regarded for their education, and their identification is Catholic, only a small proportion of the school families are now practising regularly. Two generations of students have now passed through the Catholic school experience with a very weak sense of Catholic identity and very little interest in Catholic doctrine or morality. The schools score very well in the secular curriculum compared with State and other Private schools. The sacraments of initiation are still celebrated – but more as rites of passage than significant development of an internalised practice of faith. Broad cultural values are successfully inculcated but official Catholic morality, especially sexual morality, is often not accepted. This means that the catechesis in the schools is not being received.

If the schools are to remain Catholic aimed at forming students to be committed Catholics a new evangelization is needed. We can no longer just assume that the next generation will follow the allegiance of their parents or grandparents. And a prerequisite of effective evangelization is re-visiting the core Christian message and recontextualizing it in the light of the secular and pluralistic broad culture in which we live.

Changes in the Church.

The dramatic drop in the numbers of priests and religious is resulting in a consequent change to ministerial structures. This drop in recruiting is now 40 years on. The high rates of recruitment preceding 1968 have left a group still carrying on religious and priestly ministry. The problem is that this group is now over 60 years old and will all vanish from the ministerial work force over the next 15 years. Current recruitment rates will not change quickly if at all. While current church policy makes the drastic shortness of priests intractable, the education ministry can be and largely has been passed over to non-religious.

The departure of religious from religious owned schools is resulting in consequent changes in governance. Contemporary law and regulations demand greater accountability from our schools – administratively and financially. You are adapting to this challenge by the establishment of CRA and CRV and the creation of Personal Juridical Persons to be permanent owners of your schools when the dearth of religious peaks. This work is vital because the religious congregations and a hard core of the Catholic laity that they serve have a strong personal vested interest in making the schools educationally successful and identifiably Catholic.
Meanwhile, the Catholic sub-culture has loosened and become more open. The Catholic Church which 50 years ago enjoyed tight internal discipline and a united front policy is now multi-party with some being fractious over denied human rights, immersed in public scandals. Its leadership, still assuming monarchical entitlement, is to a large extent de-authorised.

Two Mind Sets – Classic v. Evolutionary.
The theology which underpinned the catechesis that the older ones amongst us received was the neo-scholasticism which was revived at the end of the 19th century and imposed by Leo XIII as the only theology to be taught in seminaries. It, in turn, drew on the scholastic theologians of the 12th and 13th centuries – predominantly St. Thomas Aquinas. Central to that movement was the return to the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle. This theology set the climate in which other classical theologians such as St. Augustine were interpreted. One difficulty in our contemporary age is that these theologies assume a static, classic universe in which the nature of things is set at their creation. But since the renaissance and especially since Darwin’s theory of evolution, Einstein’s theory of relativity and the theory of the Big Bang, the universe is seen as always in motion, development and evolution. Pope Benedict XVI constantly attacks relativism in today’s culture. But relativity is the cousin of evolution. There is no static nature of beings in an evolutionary universe. The pope’s problem with the concept is understandable when you realize that he is a leading theologian in the Augustinian, and therefore classic, static tradition. John Paul II was thoroughly trained in neo-scholasticism. Both have called for a new evangelization in the light of the collapse of the last few decades. The theological background of both of these men explains how their vision of a new evangelization is to try to reconfessionalise rather than recontextualize.

Different Modes of Discourse.
We are not very skilled at recognising the different modes of discourse in our language. We recognise that factual report is not the same literary form as story telling. Truth can be found in the correct reportage of facts; but it can also be found in the affective and imaginative impact of a good drama or story. The language of fact – logos in Greek - is distinct from the language of meaningful experience – mythos in Greek. Theology, especially when it is told through story, as in the gospels, is mythical discourse. It yields truth via the meaning of the story rather than its factuality. The scriptures can be very badly misunderstood unless we make this distinction.

Response: Confessional, Secular, Values Focussed or Recontextualized?
The Enhancing Catholic School Identity Project being run by Louvain University and commissioned by the CECV, is a rich source of research on this question. It is the basis for this analysis.

The confessional school has been described above. It had its heyday in the middle of the 20th century. By any criteria it is struggling today. A common observation is that we have lost one or two generations from Catholic belief. The policy of the newly assertive reactionary group is to reconfessionalise the schools. This will only be effective for a niche reactionary market. Opus Dei is developing this model but their clientele is very limited. In the broader environment of the parish and our existing secondary schools it will not work. Like it or not, we have to develop a new model. One option is to keep the school’s ownership and name but to give away evangelization and catechesis and simply follow the secular curriculum.
Another option is to follow the secular curriculum but to have a strong extra emphasis on good values and good behaviour. Both of these are a departure from the primary purpose we had in establishing the schools.

The final alternative is recontextualization. Recontextualization is the term used for the re-articulation of Christian and Catholic belief in the light of the prevailing new realities of contemporary culture which is secular, pluralistic and liberal democratic. One takes the prevailing culture as a given. We presume that we cannot claim exclusive or even a primary right to have our faith view accepted. We have to enter into dialogue with this culture and present a case for Christian faith which we hope will be cogent.

The recontextualization option entails a total redesign of the RE curriculum. This necessitates firstly rearticulating our personal faith and theology.

**Challenges entailed in Recontextualizing.**

The challenges are:

- to recontextualize our own personal faith;
- to select, train and support school staff who are prepared to implement this recontextualization;
- to develop a recontextualized curriculum of evangelization and catechesis.

**The Challenge to Personal Faith.**

The challenge for those of us who have been formally part of the Catholic enterprise in Australia is to re-evaluate our own faith in the light of the cultural and sub-cultural changes of the last few decades. We want the Catholic Church and the whole Catholic enterprise to succeed. But this conviction must be more than just a tribal gut reaction. The prevailing outside culture is secular and pluralistic. It is only when we can self-confidently proclaim our faith in this environment that it is solidly rooted. I am convinced that it is only in a secular environment that the option of faith is genuinely free.

**Contemplating God Today.**

The dominant images of God as creator, provider, lawmaker and judge must be revisited and rearticulated. Otherwise they do not make sense. The button pushing, string-pulling God of the old school catechism must be replaced. One problem with this type of catechesis is that God is heavily defined. Yet we cannot define or limit God who is the ultimately unknowable, infinite transcendent mystery. Any statement we make about God is limited by our human intellect, imagination and language. Recontextualizing inclines us to return to theologies which preceded the scholastic theology of the late medieval period and the accompanying resurgence of Aristotelian and Platonic philosophy.

**Jesus Christ.**

We need a renewed theology of Jesus Christ (Christology) and of salvation (soteriology). Christian belief centres on Jesus Christ. The path by which the earliest generations of Jesus’ followers came to believe in him as Christ, saviour, Son of God can be traced by examining the New Testament documents chronologically. The earliest witness is St. Paul. His early epistles are dated to the early 50s – within 25 years of Jesus’ death. He presents Jesus as the authentic Christ or messiah of the Jews. Jesus is the Risen Christ and we can live in the Spirit if we believe in him. We become at rights with God by faith, not by the former Jewish way of keeping the law. Mark’s gospel is the next document 15 or 20 years
after Paul’s first epistles. Mark sees Jesus as Christ and Son of God. He presents Jesus as being invested with this status at his baptism by John the Baptist. Matthew and Luke are 10 or 15 years later and present Jesus as being Christ the Lord from his conception and birth. The Fourth Gospel presents Jesus as the Eternal Word who was with God from the beginning – the pre-existent Son of God. Over a short 50 years the first two or three generations of believers had developed a very high Christology.

Faith.
The very concept of faith has to be revisited. Accepting nonsense as fact is not faith; it is stupid. Faith is not believing truths. Faith is believing in meaningfulness to life and the universe which is perceived intuitively rather than by empirical explanation. It is approaching the experience of life with a new set of eyes and articulating the resulting vision using a different mode of discourse. The logical discourse which leads to accuracy and certainty in everyday life must be replaced with the discourse of mystery to articulate the ultimate realities. Logos as distinct from Mythos. In the technical terms of this quest today we must recontextualize our faith. This approach was implicitly followed by Vatican II especially in its Pastoral Constitution: Gaudium et Spes.

Reaction.
There is a movement of strong fundamentalist reaction against this recent theological development. Some see their old certainties being attacked and want to re-group because they fear that the very basis of their belief system is likely to crumble. It is an understandable reaction – but a futile one because the changes which have made the recontextualization necessary are not going to go away. It is either change or fossilize – an ironic image since it is the observation of fossils which proved beyond doubt that our universe is not static but evolving. Fossils are the wake of evolution. For an insight into the fundamentalist reaction see Karen Armstrong’s: Battle for God.

Other Challenges.
The remaining challenges relate to developing staff who understand recontextualization and a curriculum of evangelization and catechesis for teaching students. If we recontextualize our own life of faith in the light of a realistic embrace of the culture of the secular world we will be able to see the way forward. The task is demanding but, to my mind, essential if we are to move to successful development of Catholic Schools in our contemporary world.


In this chapter we shall return to the question we began with, namely, why be Catholic? When we asked that question in Chapter One, we answered it by explaining some positive aspects of Catholicism. As we turn again to that question, we shall try to answer it not by talking about generalities but by talking about individuals. We shall be talking not so much about Catholicism as about Catholics.

When most people inquire about religion, they are less interested in abstract ideas than they are in people. They are not convinced of the truth of Christianity unless they can see it being lived by real Christians. If they meet someone who is a living example of Christian faith, they can imagine how they too might live if they had such faith. If they meet a follower of Jesus who is living the gospel, they can overcome whatever intellectual problems they might have with Christianity. If they meet a group of Catholics who exemplify Catholicism for them, they can deal with the shortcomings and failures that they see in the Church.
The same can be said of us, if we are trying to understand our own Church and wondering, perhaps, why remain Catholic? One of the best ways to understand our own religious tradition is to recall that litany of individuals whom we recognize as having been great Christians. For in the end, Catholicism is not so much a history of ideas as a story of a people, and the people we call saints are the heroes and heroines of the story. They are at once the paragons of Christianity and the paradigms of Christian living.

If we read the history of Catholicism, we come across many times when the Church was beset with problems. Sometimes they were problems that came from without, such as persecutions and invasions. More often than not they were problems within, problems of malaise and ineptitude, of conflict and unforgiveness, of moral and political corruption. For a while the Church would remain deadlocked and unable to resolve the crisis, but eventually something would happen that would overcome the problem. Usually that something was a someone, some individual who could show the way to write the next new chapter in the Church’s story. And such individuals were quite often saints.

Some of the greatest saints were able to envision new ways to live the gospel when the old ways had lost their power. Some were practical people who did not write much but who had a gift for trying out new things. Some were thoughtful people who perhaps did not do much except write. In rare cases some were both pragmatic and intellectual, but all of them were prayerful, and all of them lived the gospel in ways that fit their time and place in history. Their living of the gospel is what made their actions and suggestions credible. The authenticity of their lives enabled others to trust them and to follow what they said.

By and large, Catholics have followed the example of their saints more than they have the ideas in their doctrines. Ideas are abstract, but lives are real. Doctrines can be hard to understand, but actions are easy to see. People are often bored by theology, but they are always fascinated by saints. Saints fire our imagination; they stir up our hearts; they awaken our dreams. They give us new ways to image reality and new ways to envision the future. They open up new possibilities for living the gospel, for they show us how they have already done it.

Theologian Richard P McBrien, in his book Catholicism, helps us to understand why this is so.

*Catholicism has never hesitated to affirm the “mysterious” dimension of all reality; the cosmos, nature, history, events, persons, objects, rituals, words. Everything is, in principle, capable of embodying and communicating the divine.*

The Catholic tradition is one of encountering the invisible God in and through the visible world. Catholics are attuned to seeing God in people’s lives and in what is going on around them, more than they are disposed to finding God in theological doctrines. To some extent, this explains the Catholic fascination with saints and the difference between the Catholic and Protestant traditions. Protestantism, with its emphasis on the preached and written word, has often had difficulty with the Catholic insistence on the visible, material and personal mediation of God. Catholicism, on the other hand, has always been comfortable with sacrament and ritual, with the Blessed Mother and the saints.

The Catholic Vision that McBrien speaks of is not just theoretical. Catholicism has always found the divine within the human. God’s love is incarnated in the unconditional love that people have for one another, and God’s forgiveness is mediated by people unconditionally forgiving one another. The reason for the Sacrament of Reconciliation, for example, is not so that we can be told that God above forgives us here below. We reveal our darkness to another human being so that we can honestly experience the self-revelation that is needed for complete openness to God, and so that we can experience God’s love and forgiveness...
coming to us through another human being. Believing that we are reconciled is one thing; experiencing it is quite another, and much more important for our spiritual growth.

Ultimately, the spiritual and the material worlds are one, for they are both God’s world. For us humans, who are both matter and spirit, the spiritual realities of love, forgiveness, honesty, justice, knowledge and so on are always mediated by material realities that we can see, touch, feel and hear. If we were pure spirits, we could be purely spiritual with God. As it is, we always encounter God in and through our bodies. Even when we meet God in our private prayer experience, our very material brain is always working to make that experience possible.

For Catholics then, God’s grace is always mediated through human experience of one sort or another. The grace of Jesus Christ was revealed to the apostles through their experience of him. The grace of the sacraments is mediated by the experience of the people who participate in them. In the same way the saints have always been mediation points of grace, for they make the reality of God historical and visible, tangible and credible.

The saints of every age have revealed the truth to Jesus to that age. We can see how God was revealing himself at any point in history by looking at the saints of that period. Because of their openness to God they were mediators of grace and they radiated that grace to the world around them. In the lives of the saints we can discern how God works in human life.

We need reference points like the saints because, without them, we are all too likely to make ourselves the standards when it comes to living the gospel. We can read the New Testament, but we always look at it through our own eyes. We can study the Church’s teachings, but we always filter them through our own biases. Unless we ourselves are saints, we are not likely to arrive at an unbiased understanding of the gospel.

Although each of the saints had their own particular way of viewing and living the gospel, all of them were unbiased in the sense that they put their selfish concerns aside and opened themselves radically to the truth that God was speaking to them. They were in as total a union with God as it is humanly possible to be. They threw themselves completely into doing not what they wanted but what God wanted. They surrendered themselves wholly, which is what made them holy.

In the pursuit of holiness the main obstacle is the self. It is not the circumstances that we live in, the people around us, or even the devil. The self is selfish, self-centred and self-protective. It does not want to surrender, to give up, or to give in. The self that we have become stands in the way of self-transformation. The self that we believe ourselves to be does not want to be converted.

The saints are the heroes and heroines of the Christian life because they took the most courageous step of moving beyond the self to encounter the divine. They put the self aside to stand naked before the Lord. They emptied out the self in order to be filled with God. Having gotten rid of the self, they were receptive to the wholly other. Having taken the wholly other into themselves, they allowed it to transform their lives and make them holy.

In that one respect all saints are alike. In other ways, however, they are as varied as the periods in which they lived, the circumstances in which they found themselves and the personalities they had. For both reasons it is difficult to categorize the saints, since they are all alike and yet so different. Nevertheless, the Church in its liturgical calendar classifies the saints in various ways into martyrs, confessors, virgins and so on. We shall follow some of those classifications here, but we shall also use some categories of our own to show how they were all differently the same in heroic holiness.
Purpose

SESSION 7
SESSION 7: PURPOSE

Extract from Catching Fire

The early Christian communities were bound together by a strong sense of what they were about. They were known as ‘people of the Way,’ and they certainly had a strong sense of their call to live in the way that Jesus had shown them. A way they knew was life giving in every sense of the word.

We too are called to have this sense of purpose about who we are and what we do. For baptized Christians, that call is as it was for the early Christians – to follow Jesus in seeking to bring about the reign or kingdom of God in the everyday circumstances of life and work. This is what it means to be disciple.

As people involved in Catholic education, it means that we need to understand the bigger picture of our tasks and roles - that we are part of a Church whose vision is of a transformed world. It means we realize that our work is not an end in itself, but a witness to the vision of Jesus and the enduring love of God.

Fundamentally, being a people of purpose means we have a clear sense that who we are and what we do and how we do it have an impact that echoes in eternity.

1. Article: The Mission has a Church: Responding to God’s Call in Today’s World, by Stephen Bevans, SVD

God Is a Verb

A few years ago I began to realize that our God—the God revealed to us by Jesus of Nazareth through the power of the Holy Spirit—might be best described as a verb, not a noun. What I mean by this is that the God we know from revelation might be best imagined not as a static kind of “person”—sort of like us but wiser and more powerful—who is “up there” or “out there.” Rather, in a way that is much more exciting and worthy of our adoration and love, God is a Movement—more personal than we can ever imagine—who is always and everywhere present in God’s creation, present in the warp and woof of it, working for creation’s wholeness and healing, calling creation to its fullness, and calling women and men on a small planet in a minor galaxy in this vast universe—billions of years old, billions of light years in extension—into partnership in God’s work. These women and men, Genesis tells us (1:26-27), God created in the divine “image and likeness.” They are to be, as Nigerian Old Testament scholar James Okoye tells us, stewards, caretakers, “greeners,” viceroys of God on earth.1 We do not know, although it is surely possible, that other creatures—perhaps in a far-off galaxy and perhaps many times more intelligent than we—have been entrusted by God with the same task. What we do know from revelation is that we have been.

Nothing about our God is static. One of our greatest theologians, Thomas Aquinas, spoke of God as pure act.2 God is not even static within Godself as such. God in God’s deepest identity is a relationship, a communion. “In the beginning,” Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff writes, “was communion.”3 This life in communion spills out into creation, healing and sanctifying, calling all of creation, according to its capacity, into that communion, and once in that communion, sending that creation forth to gather still more of it into communion. It is though God as such is a dance—a great conga line, I like to imagine—moving through the world, inviting the world—material creation, human beings—to join in the dance. And the more that join the more attractive joining becomes.
This self-diffusive, gathering, and sending nature of God hints at what the true nature of reality is. What is real is not what is concerned with itself or turned in on itself (this latter is Luther’s definition of sin!). What is real is going beyond oneself, being in relation, calling others to relation. The British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead suggested that God, rather than being the exception to the laws of the universe, is really their greatest exemplar. And so God is perfectly related to the world—in fact God is relation itself. God is perfectly involved in the world, and rather than unable to change and suffer with the world, God is infinite in God’s ability to be affected by the world and is, in Whitehead’s famous words, the “fellow sufferer who understands.”

God is Mission

Another way of saying all this is that God is Mission. Not that God has a Mission, but that God is Mission. This is what God is in God’s deepest self: self-diffusive love, freely creating, redeeming, healing, challenging that creation. God, as a friend of mine once said, is “love hitting the cosmic fan.” Or, to be a bit more prosaic, God is like an ever-flowing fountain of living water, poured out on earth through the Holy Spirit and actually made part of creation through the Word-become-flesh. As Vatican II’s document on Missionary Activity puts it, God “generously pours out, and never ceases to pour out, the divine goodness, so that the one who is creator of all things might at last become ‘all in all’ (1Cor 15:28), thus simultaneously assuring God’s own glory and our happiness” (AG 2).

God Inside Out

There has never been a moment when God has not been present to and in creation. From the first nanosecond of time, God has been there, in the fullness of God’s Mystery, through the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is, as it were, God “inside out” in the world. She is God’s complete presence, palpable, able to be experienced, and yet elusive, like the wind. Or, as she is described in a best-selling book today, The Shack, she is perhaps best seen from the corner of our eye rather than visible straight on.

In our own tradition, with its roots in the Old Testament, the Spirit is described as breath or wind, ruach in Hebrew. She broods over the primeval chaos in the first lines of Genesis, like a mother bird brooding over her nest. She is the breath that God breathes into the “earth creature,” ha adam, that we call Adam. She is the spirit that stirs up prophecy that brings the dry bones in Ezekiel chapter 37 to life. She is the water that pours out of the Temple in Ezekiel’s great vision in chapter 40, the water that gives life to healing plants and abundant fruits. She is the ointment in Isaiah chapter 61 that brings good news to the afflicted, to bind the wounds of the broken-hearted, that proclaims liberty to captives that frees those in captivity. US feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson beautifully sums up the Spirit’s role in history: “Whether the Spirit be pictured as the warmth and light given by the sun, the life-giving water from the spring, or the flower filled with seeds from the root, what we are actually signifying is God drawing near and passing by in vivifying, sustaining, renewing, and liberating power in the midst of historical struggle.”

God Is Like Jesus

“In the fullness of time” (Gal 4:4), the Word of God became flesh and gave the Spirit, God’s complete yet elusive presence, a human face. Jesus continued the work of the Spirit, but now God is present in a visible, audible, and concrete way. Jesus was a man led by God’s Spirit. All three synoptic gospels begin their narrative of Jesus’ ministry with
Jesus being led—or in Mark “driven” by the Spirit into the desert to prepare for his ministry (see Mt 4:1, Mk 1:12, and Lk 4:1). Luke describes Jesus’ inaugural sermon at Nazareth, as he read from the scroll of Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor, . . . to proclaim release to the captives and recovering sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” (Lk 4:18-19). The work of the Spirit in Isaiah is now the work of Jesus, and this is the program of his ministry.

In this ministry Jesus reveals the God who is a verb: God is a God who reigns, and God reigns by forgiving, healing, saving, reconciling, and being in relation. “God is like Jesus,” Uruguayan liberation theologian Juan Luis Segundo writes.6 Note that what Segundo says is not that Jesus is like God, as if we already know who God is; rather, it is Jesus who shows us what God is like. When we see the way Jesus taught and acted and suffered, we see the way God teaches and acts and suffers. Three hundred years later, when the church was embroiled in the controversy with Arius, this is what was at stake. If Jesus wasn’t truly God (homoousios to patri), then we don’t really know what God is like. The truth is, though, that we do.

Jesus taught, especially in parables. He taught about forgiveness in parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son in Luke 15. He taught about God’s generosity in the parable of the generous employer in Matthew chapter 20. He taught about how all are called to salvation in the parable of the wedding feast in Matthew 22, and about God’s persistent quest for justice as portrayed by a persistent widow in the face of an unjust judge in Luke 18.

Jesus’ was a message of joy. It’s too bad that Christian artists have for the most part portrayed Jesus as a serious, even sombre character. How could he have attracted children if he didn’t smile? How could he have held the crowds if his parables were not humorous—even though ultimately deadly serious? Recently one of my students in Chicago put me on to a wonderful internet exhibition on the “Laughing Jesus,” sponsored by the Major Issues and Theology Foundation based here in Australia. Jesus portrayed as a dancer, a comedian, a juggler and in abandoned conversation with the disciples at Emmaus has helped me visualize and better imagine the God of joy that Jesus revealed.7

Jesus healed and drove out devils. His healings and exorcisms were parables in action. Making the lame walk, the blind see, the deaf hear, the dead return to life, those caught in the grip of evil experience liberation—these were all ways of saying that God’s salvation was not just something spiritual, but fully and completely involved with living in this world.

As Edward Schillebeeckx 8 and others have suggested, Jesus himself was a parable. His own personal freedom in interpreting the Law, his fun-loving lifestyle (e.g. drinking wine), and his scandalous, inclusive behaviour all pointed to the nature of a God who is a God of life, a God who cared for all, a God of freedom.

Of course, we know where all of this got Jesus. Although his message was deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition—particularly that of the prophets—it proved to be too much for the Jewish leaders of the time. They interpreted Jesus’ joy and freedom and inclusiveness as
an affront to their tradition, even a blasphemy to the God of Israel. And they intuited—probably correctly—that if people continued to take Jesus’ message seriously it would prove a threat to the Roman occupation of their country. And so they killed him. But even here Jesus reveals the nature of God. God is vulnerable, God will not override human wickedness, but will suffer because of it. In many ways, the image of Jesus on the cross is the dearest image we have of God. God will go to such lengths to reveal a love that so deeply respects human freedom.

But you can’t kill God! You cannot stop the Movement that is overflowing life and love. The Mission continued. The disciples experienced Jesus as alive in their midst, especially when they gathered to break bread and share the cup of wine in his memory. They began to realize now that Jesus had been no ordinary man. Jesus had in one way been taken from them in death, but in another way—one that was even more real—he was still with them, guiding them by the Spirit to whom he gave a face. Gradually they began to realize that his mission—the mission of God—was their mission. The mission began to have a church.

The Mission Has a Church

Gradually. As Jesus’ disciples experienced his living presence among them—and especially after the extraordinary experience that took place some fifty days after his death, on the day of Pentecost—they realized that they had been given the task to continue Jesus’ mission of proclaiming, demonstrating and embodying God’s Reign. But, most probably like Jesus as well, they understood this mission as (1) quite temporary, for Jesus would soon inaugurate the Reign of God when he returned in glory, and (2) only for the Jews. Although Judaism had engaged in some mission to bring Gentiles into the covenant people, the prevailing understanding was that, once God’s Reign had been inaugurated, the nations would stream toward Jerusalem and acknowledge the God of Israel as the God of all the earth (e.g. Is 2:2-5). The members of the Jesus community almost certainly thought that, after Pentecost, the Jews had been given another chance to accept Jesus’ vision of God and the radical change of mind and heart that it entailed, and when the Jewish nation would change its mind and believe the good news (see Mk 1:15), the Reign would be established and the Twelve would be set up on the twelve thrones that Jesus promised to judge (i.e. rule, govern with righteousness) the twelve tribes of Israel that the coming of the Reign of God would reconstitute. The fact that they were having such success—three thousand converts here (Acts 2:41), five thousand there (Acts 4:4), people added every day (Acts 2:47)—probably convinced them that the time was very near.

But soon there began to be doubts about all of this. Stephen, with some Greek-speaking disciples perhaps, may have been the first to intuit that what Jesus meant went beyond Judaism. When he was killed for preaching such a radical, unthinkable doctrine and many Greek-speaking Jews had to flee the city lest they suffer the same fate, strange things began to happen. One of Stephen’s companions, Philip, preached to Samaritans—half-Jews, half-breeds—and they accepted the Lordship of Jesus and his vision of God and of the world. Philip was also led to preach to an Ethiopian eunuch—by law excluded from becoming a Jew—and he was moved to admit him into the Jesus fellowship. Peter was amazed to be led to the house of a Roman centurion—a good Gentile but a Gentile nonetheless—and when he preached about the Lord Jesus the same Spirit that had fallen upon the disciples of Pentecost fell upon Cornelius and his household. This was unbelievable! Peter could only baptize them, even though he had to face the grave doubts
of the Jerusalem community when he returned. When he explained they exclaimed “even to the Gentiles has God granted repentance unto life!” (See Acts 11:18).

What had started out as a movement within Judaism had become something much different. The Spirit was moving the community to another place, taking Jesus’ vision to where perhaps even he had not imagined it would or could go. The climax came—according to Luke’s theological/historical retelling in Acts—when some unnamed men and women who had fled persecution after Stephen’s execution, arrived in the great urban centre of Antioch in Syria (the third largest city in the world at the time) and preached not only to Jews, but also to Gentiles. The result was that “a great number turned to the Lord” (Acts 11:21).

My contention over the last several years has been that it was here in Antioch that the church was born. We often speak of the day of Pentecost as the “birthday of the church,” but I don’t think this is true. I think it is here in Antioch, where the disciples were first called “Christians” (Acts 11:26). My reasoning is that before Antioch—although the realization was growing all through Acts up to this point—the disciples saw themselves as Jews, not as a separate, discrete religion. Now, however, at least in germ, they began to see that in Jesus something new had begun, that God’s mission in the world—begun in the Spirit from the first moment of creation and continued concretely in Jesus—had been handed over to them. And now they were called to continue this mission to the ends of the earth—in every nation, in every culture, in every time period. Now it became clear—or at least they saw glimmers of it—that God had chosen a particular people to carry on the divine mission, to be the face of the Spirit, the bodily presence of Jesus in the world. At Antioch and thereafter, what began to become clear is that God’s mission has a church.

The Mission Has Us

The church comes to be as the church engages in mission—as it crosses the boundary of Judaism to the Gentiles, and realizes that its mission is the very mission of God: to go into the world and be God’s saving, healing, and challenging presence. This is why we can say, with Vatican II’s document on missionary activity, that the church is “missionary by its very nature” (AG 2). Mission precedes the church. Mission is first of all God’s: God inside out in the world through the Spirit, God in Jesus’ teaching, healing, including suffering. Almost incredibly—as an act of grace!—God shares that mission with women and men. Mission calls the church into being to serve God’s purposes in the world. The church does not have a mission, but the mission has a church.

Imagine what our church would be like if Christians really understood this and took this seriously. What it means is, first, that the church is not about the church. It is about what Jesus called the Reign of God. We are most church not when we are building up the church, but when we are outside of it: being good parents, being loving spouses, being diligent and honest in our workplace, treating our patients with care if we are health workers, going the extra mile with our students if we are teachers, living lives responsible to the environment, being responsible citizens, sharing our resources with the needy, standing up for social justice, consciously using inclusive language, treating immigrants fairly, trying to understand people of other faiths, etc., etc. What we realize too is that people in the church don’t have a monopoly on working for the Reign of
God. Maybe people don’t call it that, and maybe people are repulsed by the church. Nevertheless, they are our partners, our allies, and need to be our friends. St. Augustine said it wonderfully, “there are some that God has that the church doesn’t have, and so that the church has that God doesn’t have.”

Imagine what the structure of the church would be like if we recognized that it is mission that needs to be first, and not the church. We need structure in the church, for it is a human institution, and all institutions need to be ordered. But if the mission has a church, then it is the mission that has ministry, not vice-versa. Ministry would exist for the mission and not for itself. So many things that bog us down today would simply fall away: clerical privilege, restrictions on lay people’s ministry, the role of women in the ministry and decision making in the church. What would be important is not people’s roles in the church, but how ministers might equip people for ministry in the world.

If mission precedes the church, and constitutes it as such, there will be no “passive” Christians. Baptism will be understood as the main “ordination,” giving every Christian the privilege and the duty to ministry through a life lived in witness of the gospel in the world. Mission will be understood as part of Christian life. It certainly includes, but is not restricted to going overseas, or immersing ourselves in exotic cultures or dangerous situations. Many people in the church are called to this. All Christians, though, are called to minister in ordinary and extraordinary ways in their daily lives.

Imagine how the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, might be celebrated. It would be the celebration of all the people of God, and it would be the result of, a preparation for, and an act of mission. As US lay theologian Gregory Augustine Pierce has beautifully said, we don’t so much go to Eucharist as come back to Eucharist, to celebrate, be strengthened for, and share our participation in God’s mission in our everyday life. We bring our weaknesses in God’s service, the needs of the people whom we meet, and the needs of the people of the whole world—even the wounded cosmos itself—to share with our Christian community. We receive consolation and inspiration from the scriptures and the paschal mystery for our work in the world. We welcome strangers, we celebrate beautifully, we always have something in our homilies for those who might be visiting, or “putting their toes in the water” by coming to our parish. The climax of the Eucharist is the dismissal rite, when we are once again sent forth on mission. Pierce’s book is entitled The Mass Is Never Ended.

Imagine, finally, how recognizing that the mission is primarily God’s would ease our anxiety in the church. God has certainly given us the privilege of being co-workers, sacraments of God’s movement of healing, reconciliation and life-giving in our world. Ultimately, though, the work is God’s. We do our best, we work with all our hearts, but we can realize that is not all up to us. We don’t have to burn ourselves out in ministry, we don’t have to worry about our children not belonging to the church, and we don’t have to work about the millions who will never belong to the church. As Vatican II says wisely—and the phrase is one of the favourites as well of Pope John Paul II—the Holy Spirit, in a way known only to God, offers all peoples ways of participating in the paschal mystery (GS 22).
Do You Want To Dance?

Do you want to dance? Do you want to join in that great Conga Line that has moved through the world since the beginning of time and which is also the heartbeat of God’s deepest self? The dance will go on without us. It does not need us to continue its joyful progress among all peoples and in all times. But if we do join, we won’t regret it. As we dance to bring wholeness and healing and peace in the world, we ourselves will become whole, be healed, and be graced with peace. Even if we don’t join in the dance, we will be its beneficiaries. But the dance goes on; the movement which is God continues to move, God continues—joyfully, indefatigably—to be in mission. The dance has dancers, the verb has subjects, and the Mission has a church. What indeed is our response today? March 1, 2009

2. “A Blessing” by John O’Donoghue

May your work excite your heart  
Kindle in your mind a creativity  
To journey beyond the old limits  
Of all that has become wearisome.

May this work challenge you towards  
New frontiers that will emerge  
As you begin to approach them  
Calling forth from you the full force  
And depth of your understanding.

May the work fit the rhythms of your soul  
Enabling you to draw from the invisible  
New ideas and a vision that will inspire;  
Remember to be kind  
To those who work with you  
Endeavour to remain aware  
Of the quiet world  
That lives behind each face.

Be fair in your expectations  
Compassionate in your criticism  
May you have the grace of encouragement  
To awaken the gift in the other’s heart  
Building in them the confidence  
To follow the call of the gift.

2 See Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologie, Part I, Question 3, article 1.
4 Alfred North Whitehead, Process and Reality (----------), —.
5 Elizabeth Johnson, She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Discourse (New York: Crossroad, 19–_,--
6 Juan Luis Segundo——.
8 Edward Schillebeeckx, Jesus: An Experiment in Theology ----.
10 Augustine, see church PPs.
SESSION 8: COMMITMENT

Extract from Catching Fire

It is one thing to know what we are about. It is another to be committed to that with passion and conviction. Commitment gives life to the purpose we have. It is the lived out witness to the vision we carry, and the tangible expression of the deep faith we have.

The way we express our commitment is as unique as we are. But it will be nurtured in us all by a personal prayer life, and characterized by engagement with the world that is respectful, empowering and hopeful.

1. Article: The Australian Religious Landscape through Catholic Eyes, on the Eve of World Youth Day 2008 by Fr. Frank Brennan

(Published as “Ein Weltjugendtag an gottlosem Ort? – Die kirchliche und religiose Landschaft Australiens” Herder Korresponzen July 2008, pp. 345-9 (German abstract here))

James Denney, a nineteenth century Scottish Presbyterian theologian, described Australia as “the most godless place under heaven”. The label is often taken as the starting point for discussing the religious sensibility of Australians who live in a markedly secular, materialistic society founded upon the dispossession of the Aborigines who had inhabited the land for up to 60,000 years. The British were the first Europeans to establish a permanent settlement on Australian soil. They erected a penal colony at Sydney Cove, asserting sovereignty in the name of the British Crown on 26 January 1788. No treaty was negotiated with the Aborigines. No compensation was paid for the state-authorised confiscation of their lands. It took until 1992 for the Australian courts to recognise that Aborigines had rights to land which survived the assertion of British sovereignty.

The first Australian Catholics were convicts, mostly Irish. For the first 15 years of settlement, they were denied sacraments in their own Church. It was a Church of laity. The first public mass was not celebrated until 15 May 1803 by James Dixon who was also a convict, having been deported for providing assistance to Irish rebels. Military officers were in attendance at that first mass to ensure that the Irish did not use the sacrament as a foil for seditious conversations. In March 1804, 300 Irish convicts rebelled at Castle Hill on the outskirts of Sydney. Convinced that the Mass was being used as a cover for seditious gatherings, the authorities restricted Dixon’s freedom to minister to his fellow Catholics.

The first official Catholic chaplains did not arrive until May 1820, so the Australian Catholic Church was virtually without clerical leadership for its first three decades. Priest shortages are nothing new in Australia, especially in the vast outback areas. These two official chaplains were the Irishmen Philip Connolly and John Joseph Therry. They had very different approaches to ministry and soon fell out, going their separate ways. Therry developed an eye for real estate around Sydney, being able to leave fabulous bequests to the Church, including the Jesuits. Governor Macquarie laid the foundation stone of St Mary’s Cathedral, Sydney, on 29 October 1821.

In 1832, John Hubert Plunkett was appointed Solicitor General for the Colony of New South Wales – the first Catholic to be appointed to a significant position in any Australian colony. Later after the Myall Creek Massacre which claimed the lives of 28 Aborigines in 1838, Plunkett intervened to ensure that the white killers were duly tried, convicted and hanged for their wrongdoing – the first time whites went to the gallows for the murder
of Aborigines. In that same year, an English Catholic convert Caroline Chisholm arrived in Australia and became a tireless worker for newly arrived migrants who had to make their way overland to remote bush locations. No bushranger dared to take her on. When she died, her tombstone carried the epithet: “The emigrant’s friend”.

The bishop of Mauritius who had jurisdiction “over New Holland with the adjacent islands” appointed William Ullathorne, an English Benedictine, as his Australian Vicar General in 1833. Then two years later, another English Benedictine, John Bede Polding, was appointed Australia’s first bishop. He was bishop for 42 years including the long years of the Irish famine and the exciting years of the Australian gold rushes. His dream of a Benedictine mission had to be replaced by a local church staffed by many Irish priests and diverse religious orders. The Passionists opened the first mission to Aborigines in 1843. In his 1856 pastoral letter, Polding wrote, “Before all else we are Catholics; and next, but a name swallowing up all distinctions of origin, we are Australians”.

In 1866, Mary MacKillop, who will be Australia’s first saint, established the Sisters of St Joseph who were dedicated to the education of children in country towns. She was not afraid to take on the bishops. One bishop even excommunicated her briefly for insubordination in 1871. In the 1870s, there was a very spirited debate about education which was compulsory, free and secular. The Catholic Church responded by setting up a comprehensive Catholic school system which was ultimately staffed by 13,000 sisters and 2,000 priests and brothers. Not until the 1960s would the battle for “state aid” be won. Now the Catholic schools are staffed largely by the laity paid appropriate salaries with significant state funding assistance. The annual enrolment in Catholic schools is 691,000 students of whom 175,000 are non-Catholic.

When the six British colonies federated to form the Commonwealth of Australia on 1 January 1901, 850,000 of the 3.7million inhabitants were Catholic. Catholics are now the largest religious grouping in Australian society – 26.6% (5 million persons). Catholic hospitals have been built in all major cities. Catholic secondary schools receive students from the Catholic primary schools which are in most suburbs. There was no move to establish Catholic universities until the 1980s. There are now 2 Catholic universities.

Often the brighter seminarians were sent to Rome for studies and Catholics were strongly represented in every new wave of migration; but otherwise there was little cross fertilisation with the Catholic Church in other countries. International Eucharistic Congresses were staged in Sydney in 1928, and in Melbourne in 1973. Pope Paul VI was the first pope to visit, in 1970. John Paul II came twice as Pope (having already visited the Polish faithful when he was a bishop), first on an extended national tour in 1986, and then for the beatification of Mary MacKillop. After World War II, Australia hosted migrants from many European countries. In the 1960s, two of the longest serving bishops who embodied the Irish tradition (Daniel Mannix and James Duhig) died, and the White Australia policy which had restricted immigration to Europeans was finally abandoned. Many Vietnamese refugees settled after the Vietnam War. Australia, and the Australian Catholic Church, is now very multicultural. Recent Muslim migrants are now those most likely to encounter the problems which used to confront Irish Catholics becoming part of Australian society at an earlier time. In May 2008, the international media reported the decision by a Sydney local council to deny planning approval for a Muslim school. The Sydney Morning Herald editorial of 31 May 2008 noted:

> Schools of all kinds play a vital role in assimilating new arrivals into the Australian mainstream. Government schools have always done this well, taking in pupils from all
backgrounds and melding them into a single community while remaining as sensitive as possible to cultural or religious differences. But religious schools can do something similar.

For more than a century, Catholic systemic schools played the same role for a community which was viewed by the establishment with similar hostility and suspicion as Muslims may experience today. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Irish nationalism made Catholicism thoroughly suspect in this country in ways which today seem almost quaint.

In 1995, the Governor-General swore the oath of office in the presence of the Chief Justice, witnessed by the Prime Minister. All three had an Irish Catholic heritage.

There are now 1363 parishes in the 28 Australian dioceses. The bishops’ conference consists of 41 bishops including seven Archbishops. Usually there is only one active Cardinal, the Archbishop of Sydney. In recent years, the media has tended to identify Cardinal George Pell as the de facto leader of the Catholic Church in Australia. Cardinal Pell engages in public debate about a whole range of social and political questions. His fellow bishops, including the President of the Bishops’ Conference, tend to be more circumspect in the news media.

There are 1973 diocesan priests of whom 426 are retired. There are 1153 priests from religious orders. The number of priests has declined 20% between 1971 and 2005. Their median age has risen from 44 years to 60 years. This trend of ageing and diminishment is continuing. An increasing number of priests and seminarians are now coming from other countries to minister in Australia. In 1969, there were 546 seminarians in training. In 2005, that figure had dropped to 141. There are still over 6000 religious sisters and 1000 religious brothers, but with very few new vocations.

Every diocese and most religious orders have taken the opportunity of 2008 World Youth Day to prepare new programs for young Catholics. The World Values Survey conducted between 1997 and 2001 found that whereas only 7% of young Americans did not believe in God, 20% of young Australians did not believe. The same survey found that 31% of West German youth did not believe, and 70% of East German youth were non-believers. A 2007 comprehensive national study of generation Y (those aged 13-24 years) has revealed that 51% of these young Australians believe in God, 32% are unsure, and 17% do not believe. 46% of Generation Y are Christian and surprisingly the measures of their belief and practice hardly differ from their Baby-Boomer parents who are still Christian. One significant change is that young women are now no more religious than young men on many measurable indicators. 13% of Australian young people claim that only one religion is true. 31% of them believe in reincarnation, and 24% in astrology.

At Alice Springs in the centre of Australia, John Paul II met with Aboriginal Australians in 1986 and said:

The Church herself in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others.

In 1992, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) was established. Through NATSICC, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders have been assured greater involvement and greater representation in national church events and activities. NATSICC has ensured high profile indigenous participation in World Youth Day. Indigenous church leaders not only lead their local worshipping community with the assistance of visiting priests. They also organise the Church’s local indigenous initiatives and co-ordinate national Church responses to indigenous issues.
The Pope’s statement about Aboriginal involvement in the life of the church was a radical challenge. The Australian church mindset had long been one of wonderment about how much more “we”, the non-Aborigines, would need to give “them”, the Aborigines. Now the question has become how much the rest of us would receive, and receive joyfully, from Aboriginal and Islander Catholics. This question has stood as a haunting refrain for those many parishes which do not have many, if any, Aborigines in their pews, and for those Catholic schools which have fewer Aborigines per capita than the State schools in their areas.

With the reducing number of priests and religious, dioceses have reduced their commitment to the provision of full time chaplains to Aboriginal communities. There are now a handful of Aboriginal deacons. But the celibacy requirement for Catholic priests militates against young Aboriginal men becoming priests. At Alice Springs, John Paul II addressed the major theological challenge of contemporary evangelisation across the cultural divide:

That Gospel now invites you to become, through and through, Aboriginal Christians. It meets your deepest desires. You do not have to be people divided into two parts, as though an Aboriginal had to borrow the faith and life of Christianity, like a hat or a pair of shoes, from someone else who owns them. Jesus calls you to accept his words and his values into your own culture. To develop in this way will make you more than ever truly Aboriginal.

The hunger in the contemporary Australian church for spirituality which is grounded in the land and which is attentive to the fullness of human history in this part of the world has often been sated by those Aboriginal Christians who have shared their art, their prayer life, and their lives with other Australians. In the last twenty years, many Aboriginal and Islander Catholics have visited parishes to “tell their story” of faith.

The abiding grace of John Paul II’s 1986 speech is incarnated in those words in which he reverenced the Aboriginal identification with country and the daily Aboriginal reality of suffering and marginalisation. With papal reverence, he touched the deep Aboriginal sense of belonging, embracing the hope in their suffering. He conceded in the spoken word and by his charismatic presence that the Dreaming is real, sacramental and eternal. He retold the story of Genesis in Aboriginal voice. He relayed the calls of the post-exilic prophets to the contemporary powerbrokers and poor of Australia. He spoke poetically of things he knew not, knowing that those listening had endured the flames:

If you stay closely united, you are like a tree standing in the middle of a bush-fire sweeping through the timber. The leaves are scorched and the tough bark is scarred and burned; but inside the tree the sap is still flowing, and under the ground the roots are still strong. Like that tree you have endured the flames, and you still have the power to be reborn. The time for this rebirth is now!

The Australian Church has been enduring its own bush-fire, coming to terms with sexual abuse by clergy and religious. The hierarchy responded more promptly in Australia than in most other countries. A special protocol, “Towards Healing,” was established. Bishop Geoffrey Robinson was one of the key architects of the protocol. He retired early in 2004 and last year published his book, “Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus”. Most of his fellow bishops were displeased and published a statement warning Catholics about the book. They chose not to detail their objections but rather to state in the lead up to World Youth Day:
We are grateful for the contribution Bishop Robinson has made to the life of the Church. We are deeply indebted to him for his years of effort to bring help and healing to those who have suffered sexual abuse and for what he has done to establish protocols of professional standards for Church personnel in this area. In responding to the issues raised in the book, we do not question his good faith. However, people have a right to know clearly what the Catholic Church believes and teaches, and the Bishops have a corresponding duty to set this forth, as we seek to do in this statement.

After correspondence and conversation with Bishop Robinson, it is clear that doctrinal difficulties remain. Central to these is a questioning of the authority of the Catholic Church to teach the truth definitively. In Saint John’s Gospel, Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit to the disciples in order to lead them into the fullness of the truth (cf. John 16:13). It is Catholic teaching that the Church has been endowed with this gift of truth. The book’s questioning of the authority of the Church is connected to Bishop Robinson’s uncertainty about the knowledge and authority of Christ himself.

Many educated Catholics were disappointed that the bishops did not commission competent theologians to critique the book and then publish detailed objections thereby helping them “to know clearly what the Catholic Church believes and teaches”.

The controversy has evoked memories of the 1998 statement of conclusions published after the meeting of Australian Bishops and the Prefects and Secretaries of six dicasteries of the Roman Curia. The statement, published in Rome before the bishops had returned home to explain, noted a crisis of faith “manifested in Australia by the rise in the number of people with no religion and the decline in church practice. The tolerance characteristic of Australian society naturally affects the Church also. While it has many positive elements, tolerance of and openness to all opinions and perspectives on the truth can lead to indifference, to the acceptance of any opinion or activity as long as it does not impact adversely on other people.”

One prominent Australian Catholic layman, philosopher Max Charlesworth who had served as a consultor to the Vatican’s Secretariat for Non-Believers has just published a pamphlet A Democratic Church: Reforming the Values and Institutions of the Catholic Church. He asks “whether the faithful have a right to be consulted by their bishops on issues such as the shortage of priests, the possibility of women priests, the education of the clergy, appropriate measures to protect members of the Church from paedophile priests, the position of divorced Catholics, Catholic schools, the sponsorship of hugely expensive ‘World Youth’ manifestations? At present, letters to Roman authorities and Australian bishops about such matters go largely unanswered.”

In the midst of this disillusionment, mass attendance and participation in the sacraments has declined. Only 15.3% of Australian Catholics now attend mass regularly. Whatever of the grim statistics and the contemporary challenges for the Australian Church, a priest is able to reflect on the abiding grace of church life and participation. It is at the altar and in the enjoyment of the sacraments that the Australian Church continues to find life and relevance. Liturgy and sacrament are still transformative of the most ordinary lives and of the most extraordinary moments.

In the most routine parish daily mass, there is a deep silence as the priest utters the words, “This is the cup of my blood….It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven”. From the sanctuary, the priest can behold the scattered faithful who are at
that moment full of faith. When you are the priest, you know some of the stories behind the reverential postures before you. The abiding faith of these people sustains you in your own struggle for faith in a God who is with us and who cares enough to respond to our prayers, in blood.

Then we pray for peace. The silence before the prayer formula is wide enough to hold all the battles of our world and the struggles which each worshipper brings to the altar that day. As priest you see this, day in and day out, often having privileged access to those struggles.

Then come the special moments of baptisms, weddings and funerals when the churched ones are like leaven in the loaf, carrying the structure of the liturgy, while the unchurched, through their awkwardness and unfamiliarity with the forms and words, look to you to carry it through. And you look back to them to know what and who we celebrate on this occasion. It is special to be the vested one who embodies the connection between the citizens of an unchurched world wondering if there is anything more than ritual to mark the passage of life, love and death, and the parishioners of a worldly church which dares to offer the sacrament of Jesus to all comers, in season and out of season. This is the daily life of the Australian Church which is a very blessed place to be, despite the challenges of the secular, materialistic and utilitarian society and the shortcomings of a Church still finding a way to be truly Catholic and truly Australian. The Aboriginal welcome to country, and the tolerance and hospitality of the Australian Church and people will be the distinctive attributes for the World Youth Day pilgrims who come to participate in an event even grander and more friendly than the 2000 Sydney Olympics.

2. Callings by John O'Donoghue

Someone asked me recently; “What is it that haunts you?” I said: “I can tell you exactly; it is the sense of time slipping through my fingers like fine sand. And there is nothing I can do to slow it.” One of the Psalms prays: ‘O Lord, help me to see the shortness of life that I may gain wisdom of heart.’ As we get older, time seems to speed up. The sense of transience haunts nearly every heart. You feel that you could suddenly arrive at your last day incredulous that that was it; it was all over.

From time immemorial it has been one of the deepest longings of the human heart to strain against the erosion of one’s life, to learn a way of living and being that manages to find some stable ground within time, a place from where something eternal can be harvested from our disappearance. This is what all art strives for; the creation of a living permanence. It is what we are secretly doing when we become parents: endeavouring to maintain our continuity beyond our own ending. The harvesting of transience is what we also are attempting in choosing the form of life we live. When we arrive on earth, we are provided with no map for our life-journey. Only gradually, as our identify forms and we get an inkling of who we are, do possibilities begin to emerge that call us. It is one of the weightiest decisions: to decide what to do with your life. The challenge is to find a way of life that will be in harmony with your gifts and needs.

Behind each face there is a unique world that no one else can see. This is the mystery of individuality. The shape of each soul is different. No one else feels your life the way you do. No one else sees or hears the world as you do. The creation of the individual is a divine masterpiece. We were dreamed for a long time before we were born. Our souls, minds and hearts were fashioned in the divine imagination. Such care and attention went into the creation of each person. Given the uniqueness of each of us, it should not be surprising that one of the greatest challenges is to inhabit our own individuality and to discover which life-form best expresses it.
The great law of life is: be yourself. Though this axiom sounds simple, it is often a difficult task. To be yourself, you have to learn how to become who you were dreamed to be. Each person has a unique destiny. To be born is to be chosen. There is something special that each of us has to do in the world. If someone else could do it, they would be here and not us. One of the fascinating questions is to decipher what one’s destiny is. At the heart of each destiny is hidden a unique life-calling. What is it you are called to do? In old-fashioned language: what is your vocation in life?

For some people, the question of their calling is very difficult to decipher; for others, it follows from an early intuition and practically unfolds of its own accord. For some, it can be the singular and exclusive direction their life takes; for others, it can change and follow new directions. Again, some people never seem to find what they are called to do; this can burden them with a continual restlessness and dissatisfaction. When you find what you are called to do, your life takes on a focus and purpose. You come into rhythm with the deeper longing of your heart. The notion of vocation is interesting and rich. It suggests that there is a special form of life that one is called to; to follow this is the way to realize one’s destiny. Following one’s vocation ensures that what you choose to do finds itself in harmony with your inner nature. It also means that this is the optimum way to unfold and develop whatever gifts one has. A vocation does not clear before you a smooth path through difficulties. Having a sense of one’s vocation does not in any way relieve one of the travail and turbulence of being human. Indeed, being true to one’s vocation can often require a level of generosity and risk that will cause great suffering, for more often than not there is no surge of light to clarify direction; the light on offer is only enough to guide the next step.

The nature of the calling can change over time, taking a person down pathways never anticipated. The calling opens new territories within the heart; this in turn deepens the calling itself. The faces of the calling change; what at the beginning seemed simple and clear can become ambivalent and complex as it unfolds. To develop a heart that is generous and equal to this complexity is the continual challenge of growth. This is the creative tension that dwells at the heart of vocation. One is urged and coaxed beyond the pale regions into rich territories of risk and promise.

It is devastating to feel trapped in a form of life where you feel utterly misplaced and all your effort is laboured; everything you do is done against the grain. You take no joy or pleasure in what you do and your heart is haunted by alternative lives you will never have. When you feel like this, it can make for a resentful and bitter life – a life where you are neither seen nor understood for much of the time – and your gifts remain locked away, never to emerge. It is clearly time to change what you are doing; perhaps sacrifice the familiar in order to find your true calling. Such change can utterly transform your life. It is such a relief and joy to find the calling that expresses and incarnates your spirit. When you find that you are doing what you love, what you were brought here to do, it makes for a rich and contented life. You have come into rhythm with your longing. Your work and action emerge naturally; you don’t have to force yourself. Your energy is immediate. Your passion is clear and creative. A new calling can open the door into the house of vision and belonging. You feel at home in your life, heart and hearth at one.
SESSION 9: FIDELITY

Extract from Catching Fire

As people involved in the ministry of Catholic education, we carry out our work of discipleship and witness in a particular way. This ministry of Catholic education is a vital ministry of the Church. It promotes a dynamic vision of God’s faithful love, manifest in the life and mission of Jesus Christ, and these fundamental realities underpin our curriculum, our pedagogy and our professional learning.

Catholic educators have a strong sense of community among their peers and in the unique and valuable nature of the work they do. It is sacred work, because it is precious lives we nurture. In this we are called to honour the ministry of each other and all those in the past and still to come who will have given their head heart and hands to the work as part of the company of travellers we call Catholic educators.

1. Keynote Address Extract: Lay Spirituality and Charisms by Michael Green

A way to foster vitality and integrity in Australia’s Catholic Schools


Setting a context

This could be a short discussion if we took the approach that each of the authors of the books of the New Testament seems to do, that there is no discrete group of people within our Church called “laity”. It’s true: search every verse of the Christian scriptures and you will look in vain to find the Greek word laikos. And if there are no lay people, then it would follow, logically, that there could be no such concept as “lay spirituality”.

This is no cute play on words. Saint Paul would have struggled with the proposition that there are degrees of spirituality, or a kind of ecclesial caste system, that presumes that some of us were the professional, full-time, holy Christians, while others of us were only part-timers, with serviceable enough spiritual lives but having no serious claim to a developed expertise. Paul, rather, taught the Christians at Colossae, as he teaches us: “You [that is, all of you] are God’s chosen ones, his saints.” 1. In the first letter of Peter we read that we, all of us, are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people set apart.” 2. The four evangelists would have similarly been puzzled by a notion of a “lay” spirituality. In each of the four Gospels, the so-called “hard-sayings” of Jesus are not directed at some special elite, nor just to the Twelve, but to everyone. 3. They did not pen the gospels with monks and nuns in mind. The core concept is that of discipleship, and that this discipleship is for all who answer the call of Jesus. In all that has happened and has been written in the two millennia since, nothing has altered this basic truth. Each of us, as a Christian, is called to be a disciple of Jesus. There are no grades of discipleship, no first-class and second-class Christians, no full members and associate members of the Church. So, where do we get this idea of a “laity”? Is it valid? Can we legitimately talk about “lay spirituality”?

Here is not the place to present a detailed history of the development of lay people in the Church, or to trace the crests and troughs of ecclesiology over the centuries. 4 It is sufficient to recognise that ordained ministry was defined clearly enough in the first centuries after Jesus and that a concept of laity subsequently emerged by a kind of default. The relative importance and the roles of the ordained and non-ordained members of the Christian community have found varying expression over time. In the course of
the Church’s history, and in its various rites and geographical regions, there have been considerable change and difference in how the clergy and the laity – and additionally those in the various forms of eremitical, monastic and apostolic religious life – have understood their place and purpose in the Church, and have related to each other. By the end of the Middle Ages, there had developed a strong clerical ascendancy, augmented by a certain fuga mundi emphasis in spirituality, which, by implication, was exclusive of most lay people in their normal worldly lives. Morality became separated from spirituality, at least for the laity, leaving them with a diminished approach to Gospel living. This was challenged from time to time by renewal movements in the Church, often enough led by lay people or certainly accessible to them, such as that begun by Francis of Assisi, or spiritual schools such as that developed by Francis de Sales and his contemporaries. But the institutional face of the Church (as distinct from its charismatic one), remained largely clerical or monastic. The concerns and documents of the Council of Trent, for example, are occupied almost entirely with the priesthood, something that set a pattern for the succeeding centuries. As late as the time when, in the nineteenth century, John Henry Newman was pioneering some reclamation of the legitimate role of lay people in the life of the Church, he was famously condemned by Monsignor Talbot:

“What is the province of the laity? To hunt, to shoot, to entertain. These matters they understand, but to meddle with ecclesiastical matters, they have no right at all.”

The second half of the twentieth century, as we all know so well, saw much written and implemented to re-establish the right and proper role of lay people in the Church. Already before the Vatican Council, the theologian Yves Congar, especially, and others such as Hans Urs von Balthazar and Karl Rahner were agitating for change. The Council caught the spirit and formalised it by proclaiming unambiguously that the call to holiness was universal, and that the responsibility to share in the evangelising mission of the Church belonged to all Christians as a fundamental result of their baptism. It was a paradigm shift. It was, as hoped for by Pope John XXIII, an aggiornamento. The notion of the Church as the People of God was reclaimed and developed. All of us, pilgrims and disciples, are all called to be holy. How we respond to that call, in community and for the mission of the Gospel, we may understand as our spirituality.

Our own experience here in Australia is typical enough of the western Church as a whole, at least in the developed world. Consider who might have attended a national Catholic education conference sixty years ago, who would have been speaking, and what they might have been speaking about. There would have been plenty of collars and veils, lots of black and white. These clergy and religious would have been seen, and would have seen themselves, as the ones doing the work of the Church. A few lay people may have been filling in gaps here and there, but mostly they would have known their place: to pray, pay and obey. While some committed lay people might have been involved in movements such as St Vincent de Paul, the St Thomas More Society, or Young Christian Workers, and a few of the cognoscenti may have actually described such involvement as the “lay apostolate”, the Church’s self-concept was skewed towards the clerical. Today, by contrast, the work of the Church is largely undertaken by lay people. In education, in health services, in aged care, in social welfare, in youth ministry, in evangelising and catechising, in planning and animating prayer and worship, in building and leading parish communities, it is mainly Christian people other than priests or religious who are doing it. A typical Catholic conference today – in virtually any field of the Church’s mission – would be quite different: many people, both men and women, of all ages, of diverse backgrounds, with a range of connections with parishes and the life of the institutional Church, and with an even greater range of faith experience and maturity in the spiritual life. At least in my experience, it will also be a group
of people of enormous good will, generosity, and professional skill, fired by their genuine love of the people they are serving.

But what of the priests, religious sisters and brothers today? Generally in the Latin Church of western countries, they will be few and getting fewer, old and getting older. It needs be emphasised at the outset that this was not the vision of Vatican II. The composition of a conference like this was not the hope of the Council. What do I mean? When Congar and others were writing of the coming age of the laity back in the 1950s, and when the Council captured many of these hopes in documents, such as *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, and *Apostolicam Actuositatem* no one envisaged that lay people would or should replace an ageing clergy or a vanishing band of religious. Indeed, the new thinking was formulated at a time when numbers of clergy and religious were at their height. It was not anticipated that this would change, that there would be what we often call the “vocations crisis”. It was not an ecclesiology that was born out of a context of clerical diminishment. There was not a sense that lay people needed to step up to the plate because the innings of the nuns and brothers were over. So, also, in pivotal gatherings such as the Synod on the Laity in 1987, and the landmark document, *Christifideles Laici*, that came from it, there is no sense of a church or a mission that was the province of lay people alone. Other documents – and, particularly for our concerns here, those published by the Congregation for Catholic Education – are written within a similar conceptual framework. The most recent says it all in its title: *Educating Together in Catholic Schools, a Shared Mission between Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful.* The first part of the document situates this mission in the context of a central idea of the modern Church, that of *communio*. This is not a sociological concept, as Pope Benedict reminds us, but a theological and ecclesiological one, founded on the complementary and unified states of life in the Church as the Body of Christ: the laity, the ordained priesthood, and the consecrated life.

This clarification is critically important for our concerns, and we shall return to it several times. Vatican II is often misrepresented in this regard, and a misconceived ecclesiology can develop as a result. It is not good theology or good ecclesiology to speak of a “lay church”. This is not what John Paul II meant when he envisaged the twenty-first century as the century of the laity. Nor will it give us a healthy or viable understanding of “lay spirituality” if we consider the spirituality of lay people as a phenomenon that is independent from priests and religious (or vice versa). It is a diminished and incomplete understanding of spirituality, because it is a diminished and incomplete understanding of church. If this is the sense in which we are approaching it, then it is indeed not valid to talk of a “lay spirituality”. In the context of the charismatic spiritual traditions of the Church – which is the major focus of this article – it is similarly flawed to think of the spirituality of lay people as some kind of successor of the spiritualities of the religious orders that are now so limited in their presence and activity.

To develop these ideas, let us look in order at the what, the why and finally the how of the rich charisms of the Church may be able to help us to develop the spirituality we all need to become disciples of Jesus and to undertake the mission of the gospel together as the People of God.

**WHAT is lay spirituality? What is charism?**

Spirituality can be one of those nebulous concepts that people sometimes make to mean anything they want, and often nothing more than fluffy thoughts or fuzzily warm feelings. There is so much inanity that masquerades as “spirituality” on the new-age shelves of our bookshops and the “mindbody - spirit” lift-outs of our Sunday
newspapers. Spirituality is, nonetheless, something that we need to understand and to appreciate at the intuitive level.

One of my French confreres, who is also a professor of history, has suggested to me on more than one occasion when we have been discussing Marist spirituality, that no-one can engage in an informed consideration of the concept of spirituality without first having digested the definitive work on the subject, which he judges to be Dictionnaire de Spiritualité – all ten volumes of it, written of course in French! While I do not doubt the worth of such a study, I am more inclined to a more cut-to-the-chase Anglo approach to the subject, so I am attracted by a simple definition of spirituality that has been proposed by the present Superior General of the Marist Brothers, an American by the name of Seán Sammon, who suggests simply that spirituality is “what we do with our passion”.

Brother Seán describes the burning desire, the hunger, the restlessness that each of us feels, primally and deep within us: our passion. His idea seems to align very much with the famous awakening moment of Saint Augustine that we find at the beginning of his Confessions: “Our hearts are restless, O God, and they remain so until they rest in you.”

Restlessness, hunger, desire, thirst: these are not uncommon themes among spiritual writers. It is restlessness for meaning, a hunger for relationship, a desire for integrity in our lives, a passion for love. I call it a “God-thirst”. Ultimately it is a thirst that can be quenched by God alone, lived out in our loving relationships and in our prayer: union with each other, with creation, with God. For the Christian, it is discipleship with Jesus that quenches this God-thirst. Pope John Paul II, in addressing the topic of lay spirituality, points out that all Christian spirituality must always come back to a relationship with Jesus. People’s responses to the universal call to holiness may vary, according to the late Pope, as a result of differences in their concrete situations, their living and working conditions, their abilities and inclinations, their personal preferences for a particular spiritual or apostolic director, or for a specific founder or religious order, but finally an authentic Christian spirituality will lead to and from Jesus. John Paul quotes from the powerful verses of John Chapter 15: “Remain in me ... Whoever remains in me, and I in him, will bear much fruit.”

Christian spirituality will ultimately be a spirituality of discipleship, which will deepen a people’s sense of their personal vocation, give them an experience of communion with others, and propel them into mission. These are the three dimensions of any Christian life – whether it be lay, clerical or religious. The US Catholic Bishops agree with this view of the call to every person – to personal holiness, to community, and to mission/ministry – and they add a fourth, perhaps distinctively American, imperative: a call also to adult Christian maturity. Closer to home, the Archdiocese of Brisbane is shaping its mission around the same tripartite understanding of the Christian life, calling it simply “Jesus, Communion, Mission”.

John Paul II, while pointing out that the essence of all Christian spirituality leads to and from Jesus, also importantly observed that each one of us will engage this discipleship in a different way, a way that suits who we are, where we are, how we are living and working, and connects with our personal abilities and preferences. What he is saying is that there are, legitimately, different forms of Christian spirituality and these forms will work well for some people, but not necessarily so well for other people. The personal spiritualities of some of the most inspiring Christian people in the Church’s history have grown into spiritual traditions, and indeed schools of Christian spirituality, as others have been attracted to learn from these people, and have found that their distinctive way
of discipleship has also worked for them. Some of these spiritual traditions will more naturally and readily satisfy the God-thirst in one person than will others. This is not to suggest that some Christian spiritualities are richer or more efficacious than others – that is another matter – but only to recognise that all Christian spiritual traditions have grown out of particular social, cultural, ecclesial and historical contexts. The kind of spiritual practices, emphases and styles that have evolved as a result of the origins and development of a particular spiritual tradition may not connect so well with someone whose present situation is not socially, culturally or ecclesially similar. A person must feel at home in a spirituality if it is going to lead that person to a genuine experience of Christian discipleship. It has to feel right; it has to fit who that person is, and where, when and how he or she lives. That is not to suggest that it might not be a challenging experience, or have its quite demanding aspects, as the Spirit takes the initiative. It has to be able, however, to bring the person’s faith, culture and life into harmony, to give his or her life an integrity and a unity. Many people experience some degree of disconnectedness between their ordinary lives – in family and in work – and the “God stuff”. These are people in search of a spirituality that will allow them to integrate these different strands, to be able to incarnate the gospel, as it must be. Each of the great spiritual traditions of the Church, for example the Benedictine or the Ignatian, was begun by someone who sought to do this and was able to effect it in a way that was compelling both for them and for their time and place. Benedict and Ignatius, both as laymen, had an experience of God over time that led them to develop a distinctive response. Both wrote it down, so we have the Rule of St Benedict and the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius, in order that, as other people were inspired to follow them, they could be schooled in the same spiritual experience. In the context of this paper, it may be important to emphasise that the Spiritual Exercises – which underpin Ignatian spirituality and all that flows from that spirituality – were developed long before Ignatius was ordained priest or founded the Society of Jesus. They came from a lay person’s experience of God in his ordinary living. This is not to define it as a “lay” spirituality, but as a Christian spirituality, one that has sated the God-thirst of countless men and women, lay and clergy, consecrated and married, for centuries now. So, also, could we point to so many traditions – Franciscan, Dominican, Augustinian, Lasallian, and others – that have done the same.

We are wading now into the domain of what is commonly described in contemporary Church parlance as “charism”. If “spirituality” is an evasive concept to pin down, “charism” can be downright problematic. That is because it has become a shorthand, grab-all, jargon word for a range of spiritual, social, ministerial and other sub-cultural phenomena. We need to be cautious about our use of this word. For some it means little more than a distinctive pedagogical style; for some a cult-like attachment to a particular founder or foundress; for some an insular or inwardly focussed association of people with a circle-the-wagons motivation for remaining associated; and for others a nostalgic but ill-defined hankering after what it was like when the sisters or the brothers were around. None of that is charism, because none of it is likely, of itself, to promote either discipleship of Jesus or to serve the evangelising needs of the Church.

Charism is not a word that has had much currency in the Church over the centuries. Indeed, since St Paul coined a Greek word drawn from charis (meaning “gift” or “grace”) to describe the spiritual gifts evident in some early Christian communities, it has not found significant mention in Church documents or teaching until the twentieth century. Vatican II famously gave the word oxygen and put something of a new spin on its meaning in key paragraph of Lumen Gentium God distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank. By these gifts he makes them fit and ready to undertake various tasks and offices for
the renewal and upbuilding of the Church. Whether these charisms\textsuperscript{18} be very remarkable or simple and widely diffused, they are to be received with thanksgiving and consolation since they are fitting and useful for the needs of the Church.\textsuperscript{19}

Pope Paul, in applying this Vatican II understanding of charism to the religious life itself and as well as to individual founders and foundresses,\textsuperscript{20} helped to take the concept further than we find it described in the Pauline texts. It then became a term recurrently used by Pope John Paul II, and employed in the same sense:

The Holy Spirit, while bestowing diverse ministries in the Church communion, enriches it still further with particular gifts or promptings of grace called charisms. They can take a great variety of forms both as a manifestation of the absolute freedom of the Spirit who abundantly supplies them, and as a response to the varied needs of the Church in history.\textsuperscript{21}

The word has entered general Church discourse, nowhere more than in Church’s service ministries of education and health care. This has been perhaps because these ministries are often enough undertaken or sponsored by apostolic religious institutes of relatively recent founding whose corporate memory of their founding generation is proximate and alive, and ones who have been active in attending to the spiritual formation of their lay co-workers. This has been a mixed blessing. The benefits – which we will explore more fully below – have been many, as lay people have found rich spiritual paths to follow and inspirational fellow travellers with whom to share the journey. But there have also been, and continue to be, some less helpful developments. A first has been the misappropriation of the word charism, a word that is problematic in itself because of confusion with its close lexical cousins “charisma” and “charismatic”, and it’s other uses in the Church, particularly within the Catholic Charismatic Renewal and the various Pentecostal movements. A second has been demeaning of the word as the result of another confusion: people’s mistaking the temporal expressions of a charism (for example, a distinctive teaching or caring style, or a grouping of people) with the essence of the charism itself, which is always a way of embracing the gospel of Jesus. This has happened as the original charism has attracted successive generations of people who have developed a communal story, a culture, replete with its heroes, legends, sacred places, music, literature, iconography, ministerial style, and its strength of association. While all of these things can and should be authentic ways of incarnating Christ-life in our world – of allowing the Word to pitch his tent in our midst – there is sometimes confusion between the tent and its inhabitant. This seems particularly the case when the charism has been the means of addressing a practical social need, such as education or health care. A third factor is the conventional view that a charism belongs to a religious order or some other church group, when in fact it belongs to the whole Church, to all the People of God, for its benefit and its enabling for mission.

So, can we validly continue to use the word charism in such a way that its post-Vatican II usage does not betray or skew its Scriptural origins? The answer to that question is yes, but carefully. The concept of charism as it was understood by the Council and has been used by the Magisterium since then, is the same as Paul’s: a grace of the Holy Spirit, freely given to a member or members of the Christian community, to enable them to receive and to preach the gospel of Jesus in a particular way, and that every charism enhances the Church’s shared capacity for the service of the Gospel.\textsuperscript{22} The novelty of recent Popes’ use of the term, and its widespread currency in the Church, including Catholic schools, is not essentially at odds with this. Indeed, it is well that those involved in Catholic Education
embrace the call of the Council and of the Popes of our time to receive these charisms "with gratitude". The charisms are, as one commentator has put it, the "great gospel ideas", the inspired ways of discipleship that have stood the test of time and have proven fruitful, that have inspired generations of Christians to recognise and to love their God, and to undertake the mission of the Church. They have given them a story to join, a community of mission to which to belong, a work to do, a way to pray, a face of God to see. They have been built around inspired and inspirational people, indeed saints. They have grown in rich and wise schools of spirituality. These charisms are treasures of the Church; they are the Spirit alive in the Church. The word "charism", nonetheless, remains a little strange for many, one that doesn’t roll easily off the tongue. For this reason, and because of the way it can be misused, I usually prefer to use the terms “spirituality” or “spiritual tradition” except where the meaning of charism or charismic is clear from the context. It should not be presumed that Christian spiritualities are all “old”, or even new expressions of old. While the Church remains profoundly enriched by its well established spiritual traditions such as the Benedictine, Ignatian, Franciscan, Marist or Salesian that were born of monastic, mendicant and apostolic movements over the centuries, the Spirit continues to irrupt among us, to inspire and to create. The last century saw a remarkable explosion of new movements both before and after the Council, for example the St Egidio Community, the Focolare Movement, Communion and Liberation, the Neocatechumenate, Opus Dei, the Emmanuel Community, the Charismatic Renewal, the Cursillo. In many cases, these have grown up in situations where the life of the Church, including the consecrated life, had become jaded and tepid, or anonymous and tired. Generally called the “New Ecclesial Movements”, they stretch across the liberal-conservative spectrum, if such a thing exists, and continue to attract many new members. In one country, Spain, it has been estimated that over forty per cent of Catholics actively involved in the Church are doing so primarily as part of a “movement” rather than through parish or traditional structures.

The two most common ways in which lay people are connecting themselves with the spiritualities of the Church are, first, through the New Ecclesial Movements and, second, through movements associated with established religious orders and institutes. This parallel but not unconnected development was symbolised ten years ago when two quite separately convened gatherings occurred contemporaneously in Rome. The first was the regular meeting of the Union of Superiors General which devoted its 1999 meeting to examining the myriad of ways that lay people were seeking to associate themselves in one way or another with the spiritualities that had long given life to religious orders and religious institutes. Some of these orders had had lay branches for centuries, for others it was a new challenge. It was their common experience, however, that lay people were being attracted in unprecedented numbers to share in the spirituality and the mission of the different traditions. There was a broadly felt call that they needed to widen the space of their tents. The second gathering was the first World Congress of Ecclesial Movements, a plenary gathering of invited leaders of fifty-six new ecclesial movements. Much favoured by John Paul II in the last ten or so years of his pontificate, these movements had grown to such an extent that many in the Church were beginning to see them as the most efficacious way that the Church of the present age was being prompted to be renewed and reformed by the Spirit. It has always been new movements, or fresh irruptions of the Spirit, that have reformed the Church, and often enough they have been met by suspicion by the old guard of the Church. This is not the place to undertake a deep analysis or evaluation of this modern Church phenomenon, but only to observe that there are new spiritualities continuing to emerge in the Church, including ones that are being associated with Catholic schools. Although the new movements represent a
range of style, structure and emphasis, many of them share a number of characteristics: they are predominantly lay in their membership but also have clerical members as well as a few who make a deeper, life commitment (in some cases as consecrated people, in some cases not); they have a more radical way of living the gospel than is typical of many other members of the Church; they emphasise fellowship and community experience rather than private spirituality; they are zealous in catechesis and evangelisation; and they are attractive to young people in particular by proposing Christ in compelling and fresh ways. In the context of a consideration of charisms, the growth and the vitality of the new ecclesial movements teach something critically important to the whole Church. Almost without exception – whether they appeared before or after the Council – they have a structure that is consistent with Vatican II’s emphasis on communio: they are largely lay, with lay people unambiguously embracing their baptismal responsibilities to grow in Christian holiness and share together in the mission of evangelisation, but they also have a strong Sacramental life with the ordained pastors of the Church actively exercising their priestly ministry within the movement’s life, and mostly they allow for some members to make a more intense, celibate, long-term or permanent commitment, and to live a common life in ways not dissimilar to older forms of the consecrated life. They exist to provide a means for their members to deepen their own sense of vocation and holiness, to form community, and to take part in the mission of the Church. In this they provide a paradigm for the traditional spiritualities if these spiritualities also are going to continue to be relevant and engaging for the contemporary Church. The “old” spiritualities are called to the same thing: to be largely but not exclusively lay, to be able to integrate their charismatic vitality into the institutional life of the Church, and to inspire their members to a holiness that propels them to mission.

It is the lay thing that will be the biggest challenge for many of the traditional spiritualities, because they have for so long been defined primarily in terms of clergy and religious, with lay people often seen only as associates. Some traditions, however, such as those associated with Ignatian, Franciscan and Dominican spiritualities, have long enjoyed a quite inclusive membership by recognising that all people can embrace the spirituality in differential ways that suit their respective state of life, and their other personal circumstances. For example, the Christian Life Communities, the Apostleship of Prayer, the Eucharistic Youth Movement, and various Jesuit volunteer organisations, as well as a number of congregations of religious sisters such as The Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (the “Loreto Sisters”) and the Sisters of Charity, are all Ignatian in their spirituality and identity but are not institutional appendages of the Society of Jesus. Indeed, at their 2008 General Congregation, the Jesuits deliberatively rejected some kind of institutional membership of non-Jesuits because it blurred the consecrated identity of the Jesuits themselves. This was not to suggest that lay people were to be excluded from the Ignatian way; quite the contrary. The Congregation was distinguishing between “Jesuit” and “Ignatian”, and it proposed the concept of an “Ignatian Apostolic Network” among all those “who share an Ignatian commitment to service in the Church”. The Jesuits were thus proposing that the way forward for Ignatian spirituality in today’s Church, was to be around a sense of shared mission, with people acting as a church community and graced by a spirituality built on one of the “great gospel ideas” as it has evolved over the centuries. So must it be for any group. Here are the essential links between charism and lay spirituality.

Why ‘lay spirituality and charisms’? And why now?

Over the last three decades, the Congregation for Catholic Education has published several simple but profound documents on the identity and the purpose of the Catholic
school, addressed principally to those of us who undertake this critical aspect of the Church’s mission across the world. They are all well worthy of our reading. Early in its most recent publication, one which addresses the complementary roles of lay people and consecrated in Catholic schools, there is a critically important observation:

The project of the Catholic school will be convincing only if it is carried out by people who are deeply motivated because they witness to a living encounter with Christ, in whom alone ‘the mystery of man becomes clear’.29

There are, at the present time, no greater challenges to the integrity and the effectiveness of Australian Catholic schools as agents of evangelisation than (a) the depth of spirituality and (b) the degree of ecclesial commitment of those who teach and work in these schools. In world terms, our Australian Catholic schools are built and resourced outstandingly. They are led and staffed by well-educated professionals, indeed people who, in the history of Catholic education in this country, have never been more highly qualified. Although most of us are endlessly chasing extra funding for this or that capital project, and always seem to have fewer dollars than we have ways to spend them, our funding levels and our resources are the envy of most countries. The schools are serviced by Catholic education Offices and Catholic Education Commissions that provide high level curricular, financial, legal, and personnel support for policies, programmes and governance. They allow our dioceses and religious institutes to conduct a world-class network of schools, and to be able to offer these to virtually anyone who is seeking a Catholic education. But to what extent is it still a Catholic education that we are offering? Or, to put it more pointedly, to what extent are our schools communities where the gospel of Christ is proclaimed unambiguously and received openly, where Jesus is known and loved personally, where the reign of God pervades all that is done there and how it is done? Are they places that satisfy the God-thirst in people and promote Christian discipleship? Let us hope that the answer to each of those questions is strongly affirmative. Many of us work in such places; most of us know schools where it is exceptionally so. The degree to which it is the case in a school will be largely a function of the depth to which the staff who lead it can personally answer yes to each of those questions posed.30

For the first time this year, I heard of a Director of Catholic Education in one diocese who openly questioned if a particular school in his diocese – a largish, urban, secondary school – could any longer be honestly called a Catholic school. Yes, the school was still a school owned and operated by the diocese; its signage and documents all proclaimed its church identity; it required its students to take the usual religious education classes; a majority was nominally Catholic; and there were other ostensible vestiges of its Catholic heritage. But was it any longer Catholic in practice? His doubts seemed to be more prompted by his assessment of the people who led and staffed the school rather than the largely un-churched and student population whose active parish engagement was probably less than five percent. What was the staff’s personal sense of being disciples of Jesus, or their being Christian educators? What was their understanding of the Church’s mission in education and their own role as evangelisers? How many of them had any sort of conscious or committed religious faith, let alone a Catholic one? What was their working knowledge of Scripture and of the teachings and traditions of the Church? What was their parish involvement? What were their social justice involvements? The religious institute which had originally founded the school had long since ceased any connection; the local pastor had written it off and rarely visited.
While not wishing to be unnecessarily alarmist or pessimistic, there are likely to be an increasing number of such schools, or schools heading in that direction. As the next generation of teachers moves into middle-management and senior leadership – a larger number of whom have grown up in families that have not been active in their practice of the faith in the traditional sense – this is likely to become more the norm. There will be what some commentators call “mission drift”.\textsuperscript{31} You notice it first in little ways, such as the staff briefing starting with a “reflection” rather than a “prayer”, so as to be more inclusive and not to offend anyone’s religious sensibilities; or images or posters with beautiful photographs of sunsets or rainforests with some pithy sentence of wisdom, replacing more overtly religious figures or images. Then the rhetoric of the school may shift ever so subtly from talking about faith in God and a personal relationship with Jesus, to more vaguely espousing the Christian values that underpin the school. Masses may begin to be replaced with non-Eucharistic liturgies, and gradually the celebration of the Sacraments in the school community just doesn’t happen any longer. The danger? It moves subtly towards becoming just a low-fee private school – albeit one that may be quite professionally run and with a solid value base that is not in conflict with the Gospel – but with little capacity for explicit evangelisation or catechesis, or much understanding of it or vision for it. As far as involvement with the life of the Church goes, the main point of connection may be through the local Catholic Education Office rather than any parish, pastor or religious institute, these being judged – possibly not too unfairly – to have lost touch, lost vitality, and lost relevance for the school. They might still be saying something, but not in any effective way. In any case, the school is no longer listening to them.

Not everyone will be uncomfortable with such a scenario, or even necessarily notice that it has actually happened. The world of young Australian people, including younger teachers, is for the most part a post-Christian and post-modern one. There are quite notable and inspiring exceptions, and there are certainly differences among ethnic communities across the country, but most people under fifty live quite secular lives. They are not the “ecclesial natives” that their grandparents were, and perhaps some of their parents. Church is another country. They don’t always feel at home there, or understand its language. They do not intuitively connect with it. It is not their tribe, as it was their forebears. Increasingly, on enrolment application forms, we are seeing “not applicable” written in the box where applicant and parents are asked to nominate their religious affiliation. It is not done provocatively, just honestly. It is no more than a reflection of the fairly rapidly changing statistics that we read in five-yearly national census.

Should we panic? Should we limp off in defeat? Only if we are not students of history, or have doubts about the Church’s facility for renewal, or do not believe in the Holy Spirit. There have been many times over the centuries, in various places, when the Church has become dispirited, discredited, and disenfranchised. What has happened? One of two things, typically: either it has wallowed in its old ways and remained disconnected from the lives of most ordinary people, or it has been open to the fresh ways that the Spirit has offered people to satisfy the God-thirst in them, personally and communally, ways that suited their time and place. Witness, for example, the emergence of the Franciscans and the Dominicans in the medieval church, the Jesuits in the Counter-Reformation, or the explosion of apostolic movements in France in the decades that followed the revolutionary-Napoleonic period. In our own country, look at the contribution of religious institutes in saving and building our Catholic education and health sectors. The Spirit will always be seeking to irrupt when and where the needs are greatest. The inspirational people and the inspired movements that emerge in such situations – for example the apostolic religious institutes of the nineteenth century – sometimes have a short life span.
to allow the Church to meet the needs of a particular time and place. This is the fate of most. They are established, they serve the Church’s mission for a time, and then they fade. Others – a smaller number, and what Lumen Gentium may have understood as the “more remarkable” ones – enter the life of the Church, and become a continuing part of its spiritual fabric. They do this by their facility for adaptation to different times, places and cultures, and their accessibility to many different people. For example, the Middle Ages saw the birth of both the Franciscans and the Knights Templar. While both grew exponentially and influentially, one proved to be a creature of its time and today seems weirdly anachronistic, the stuff of a Dan Brown novel; the other continues to be one of the most attractive spiritualities of the Church, still capturing the hearts and imagination of the young, still giving a graced way of Christian discipleship. This seems to be the way of the Spirit. For a spirituality to be one that will serve the Church of the third millennium, and particularly one that is going to be embraced by a contemporary Catholic school, it will need to be one that allows for an expression of communio in the sense that Vatican II has proposed it: it must be inclusive of lay people as its main constituent group. Let us look for such spiritualities. Let us be alert for them, because it may be that we might just find the Spirit at work.

Franciscan spirituality, to continue that example, is a telling case in point. When an invitation to a conference went out earlier this year to every school in Australia that bore the name of St Francis, or had some historical connection with one or other Franciscan group, there was an avalanche of responses. Many Australian Catholic schools have St Francis or St Clare as their patron saint, or were founded by Franciscan sisters or friars, but have long since ceased using a Franciscan spirituality to define their identity or to shape their mission, if it was ever there at all. They are not unusual in that. Many schools, especially parish primary schools, have not continued to draw from the spirituality associated with their founding religious institute in a normative or defining way after the sisters, priests or brothers withdrew. Nor do many schools make much more than occasional reference to their patron saint. It is not so much a decision not to reject this approach; it is more a case simply that there is no ongoing connection with that spiritual tradition among the leadership of the school, or the name with which the school is saddled does not seem to connect naturally with its present reality. For many parish schools, the way the gospel finds its vitality and incarnation is in the life of the parish itself: its community, its sacramental programmes, its liturgies, and its various ministries. Does a school need to tap into one of the charismatic spiritualities of the Church in order to be a vibrant, spiritually rich, and effective evangelising community of mission? Not at all. If the parish is firing and the staff of the school is closely integrated into it, or if there is a practice and tradition in a particular school community that attends to the spiritual nourishment of its staff and there are good means of sustaining this, or if there is leadership in the school that is spiritually credible, informed and inspiring, then a school should well be able to remain a genuine and effective Catholic school. It has to be suspected, however, that the extraordinary response to the Franciscan invitation this year indicates that many Australian Catholic schools – staffed almost entirely by lay people – are struggling with their sense of mission effectiveness, and are looking for something else. The movements that have grown from the “great gospel ideas” can provide them with some answers for their search.

How can the charisms of the Church empower lay people for mission?

The Church has always been revitalised by movements, by inspired and inspiring people. The great “spiritual families” of the universal Church that continue to this day, and the newer ones to which the last century gave birth, are such movements of grace. At the
present time, the Church looks to these spiritual families, through their inclusion of lay people within them, as “one of the great hopes for the future of the Catholic educational mission”. The ones that allow lay people to draw on the spiritual and apostolic fruitfulness of the original charism of the movements’ founders, while at the same time ensuring that they can live out fully their secular vocation, are those to which we as contemporary Catholic educators should be looking.

The Second Vatican Council spent some time considering the complementary roles of the hierarchical and the charismatic dimensions of the Church. It saw that the Church needed both its structures of authority, teaching and organisation, as well as ways that fostered its being open to the movement of the Spirit in fresh and compelling ways, even in ways that were unsettling, as they were for Mary the mother of Jesus. Without the former, the Church would lack direction and surety, without the latter it could lack vitality and relevance. For the Church to proceed with both integrity and inspiration, it needs both. The Council Fathers probably did not have in mind Catholic Education Offices when they were debating the role of the institutional structures and the exercise of authority, but perhaps these creatures of the Australian Church are not too far from their thinking. A Catholic Education Office is essentially an arm of a bishop’s curia, his bureaucracy; it is a contemporary expression of the institutional dimension of the Church. There is nothing wrong with that; indeed it is essential for prudent governance and stewardship. At the same time, a local church needs continually to ask itself – as does the universal Church – about the relative influence that its curial offices have at any one time, because it is less likely that these are going to be the nests from which the fresh and surprising ways of the Holy Spirit will fly. This is a strong claim, but look at the history of the Church, look at where and in whom the great irruptions of the Spirit have occurred. No, the role of the institutional arm of the Church is, in Lumen Gentium’s words, to receive these charisms “with gratitude and consolation”. To take this a step further, a bishop who is interested in enlivening the life of his local church would be always alert to inviting new charismatic movements to his diocese and to supporting older ones to renew themselves and to remain apostolically and spiritually fruitful. It is a way for him to keep a rich “ecclesial gene pool”. The larger charismatic movements have a life in the universal Church, and so can bring to a local diocese and a local parish a broader view of church and a diversity of spirituality that may be unlikely to grow indigenously. They also provide a necessary foil to the natural tendencies of any bureaucracy – ecclesial or otherwise – that can confuse uniformity with unity, diversity with disunity, innovation with disloyalty, and difference with independence. Look at the ways that some of the new ecclesial movements have been treated with suspicion and rejection, because they do not fit the prevailing model of how the Church should operate or how spirituality should be expressed. Some of the new movements – including those associated with as an exciting a phenomenon as World Youth Day – are sometimes dismissed as conservative, revisionist and, therefore, out of sympathy with the aggiornamento and “spirit” of Vatican II. Interestingly, these criticisms often enough come from late middle-aged Catholics – including religious and priests – who themselves have become somewhat tepid or anonymous in their witness to their faith or their overt practice of it. We have all probably also met these Vatican II refugees from the 1960s and 1970s who are cynically dismissive of anything they judge to be pre-conciliar. When they see young people showing up in huge numbers to Eucharistic Adoration or Benediction, or lining up for individual Confession, or wearing clothes that identify them as committed Catholics, even religious habits, it has them tut-tutting over their caffé-lattes and choking on their scotches. For the young people, burdened by none of their elders’ baggage, they are simply developing a personal relationship with Jesus, allowing their imagination to be captured by the beauty of the Church’s liturgy, and being inspired to make a radical commitment of their lives, as young people do.
Forgiveness and other acts of love by Stephanie Dowrick

For the first time in a narcissistic society. That makes the practice of fidelity – knowing how to be true to our own selves, and knowing we are capable of being true to others – exceptionally difficult. Narcissism and fidelity do not fit well together. We are subtly and not so subtly encouraged by movies, marketing, advertising and pop culture, which also permeate government and political rhetoric, to regard each other not as precious ‘selves’, deserving of respect and trust, but as objects of consumption. Greed is far sexier than gratitude; competitiveness is much ‘hotter’ than co-operation. Power and money are what matter.

2. Extract from Forgiveness and Other Acts of Love by Stephanie Dowrick

Forgiveness and other acts of love. Stephanie Dowrick, (1997)

We live in a narcissistic society. That makes the practice of fidelity – knowing how to be true to our own selves, and knowing we are capable of being true to others – exceptionally difficult. Narcissism and fidelity do not fit well together. We are subtly and not so subtly encouraged by movies, marketing, advertising and pop culture, which also permeate government and political rhetoric, to regard each other not as precious ‘selves’, deserving of respect and trust, but as objects of consumption. Greed is far sexier than gratitude; competitiveness is much ‘hotter’ than co-operation. Power and money are what matter.
Mostly we live in a heightened state of insatiability, wanting what we haven’t got, forgetting and discarding what we already have. Brittle, fragile relationships are normal, with each person watching their own back, rather than the face of the person they most want to love and be loved by.

Caring about people lovingly and well demands fidelity. ‘Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much,’ said St Luke. To bring fidelity to life – taking on what it means to choose to be consistent, persistent, trustworthy, committed, truthful, loving, and delicate in your discernment between what matters and what does not – you need to be capable of vigilance; of staying awake to the subtlety of what happens between you and other people. This means caring about details as well as the big picture. It means learning that what may be a small thing to you may carry much greater meaning for someone else. Your own view may not change as you discover this, but it is usually possible to express your respect for a different view and to take this as an opportunity to deepen your knowledge of that person. Because fidelity also asks that you care about other people and yourself equally and simultaneously.

This is not so easy. It involves being ‘transparent’ to your own self-deceptions; taking responsibility for what your needs are; facing what is unpalatable about your intentions or behaviour. It involves developing the strength and clarity of mind to distinguish between intention and action, knowing that what you desire and how you act may sometimes need to be two quite different things. It means acknowledging that the way you feel about someone may sometimes ask something difficult of you. It may mean, in thinking about yourself and those you love, that you must look inward sometimes, as well as outwards. It means taking stock often, and pausing.

Fidelity asks of us that we have a sense of who we are beyond the easy descriptions of work, age, sexuality or marital status; that, through living observantly, we discover what our values are. And that we find ways to live out those values while always recognising through our decisions and actions that our values are meaningless when they don’t take into account that others’ interests are as important as our own. Jungian analyst James Hollis says that, ‘While maintaining fidelity to outer relationships, we must become more fully the person we were meant to be. Indeed, the more differentiated we become as individuals [by which he means, the more you become yourself], the more enriched will be our relationships.’

Hollis’ confidence that we enhance all our interactions with other people by feeling more at home in our own lives, and being more fully ourselves, is heartening. In my experience, it is also true. But what are we to make of his notion of ‘the person we were meant to be’? The phrase is a loaded one and sits, waiting, at the heart of the questions of fidelity. Faithful to what? Faithful to whom? ‘The person we were meant to be’ seems to imply a deterministic view of human development that contradicts all I have been suggesting about freedom, will and choice. The idea of destiny is not simple, however. It raises the prospect that there is an essential meaning to each life and that the task of each life is to find and live out that meaning. Or find it through living it out. This may be an idea more familiar to those influenced by Eastern thinking than Western, yet psychoanalyst Viktor Frankl captured just this idea when he wrote, ‘Everyone’s task is as unique as (their) specific opportunity to implement it.’

To be faithful to another – whether a person, principle or divinity – means being faithful to oneself, transparent to oneself. Piero Ferrucci
Reviewing the Journey

SESSION 10
SESSION 10: REVIEWING THE JOURNEY

At the End of the Year in Benedictus by John O’Donoghue

The particular mind of the ocean
Filling the coastline’s longing
With such brief harvest
Of elegant, vanishing waves
Is like the mind of time
Opening the shapes of days.

As this year draws to its end,
We give thanks for the gifts it brought
And how they became inlaid within
Where neither time nor tide can touch them.

The days when the veil lifted
And the soul could see delight;
When a quiver caressed the heart
In the sheer exuberance of being here.

Surprises that came awake
In forgotten corners of old fields
Where expectation seemed to have quenched.

The slow, brooding times
When all was awkward
And the wave in the mind
Pierced every sore with salt.

The darkened days that stopped
The confidence of the dawn.

Days when beloved faces shone brighter
With light from beyond themselves;
And from the granite of some secret sorrow
A stream of buried tears loosened.

We bless this year for all we learned,
For all we loved and lost
And for the quiet way it brought us
Nearer to our invisible destination.