



**The Gift of the Young Church
Australian Catholic Youth Festival**

CATECHESIS

**Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
Archbishop of Perth**

Qudos Bank Arena, Sydney Olympic Park, Sydney
Friday 7 December, 2017

I am here today to talk about the gift of the young Church, but we have actually been living the gift of the young Church for the last three days. So in a sense, you are the people who should be telling me what the young Church is all about.

What I would like you to recognise, then, is that you have been living the reality of the topic we are talking about today, the gift of the young Church.

Let us think for a moment about the idea of 'Gift'. I think it is important for us to do so. Certainly as I think it through, I realise that a gift, a true gift, is something which is freely given. A genuine gift, a gift that is really worthwhile, is given by someone because he or she wants to give it. There is something moving in the heart of the person who gives the gift, something free rising up within them, which leads them to offer a gift to someone who, of course, can either receive it or not receive it.

In this light I want to invite you to think about this idea: that the gift of the young Church, before it is a gift young people make to the Church, is actually a gift of God to the Church.

You are the gift of God to the Church. In a sense therefore we can say that something has "moved within the heart of God", who wants to give this gift to his people, which means of course to the whole Church.

Something very important for us to remember these days, when it is not easy to belong to the Church because of all the difficulties the Church is experiencing, is our belief that at its heart the Church itself is God's gift to us.

The desire within the heart of God to give us this special gift of the Church leads God to offer this gift to us, but of course leaves us free to decide how we will respond. We do need to remember, though, that what motivates a person to give a gift, a genuine gift, is affection and love. If you give a gift because you are expected to, or even forced to, then the gift really does not have much value.

If instead you give a gift because you care about the person, because you want to make that person happy, because you want to make that person's life richer, and fuller, then the gift really is a genuine one. It becomes a sign of affection or esteem. It indicates that you really admire



someone, and want to have a way of showing how much you admire them. It is a gift from the heart. More than anything else, then, a gift is a sign of love.

Because of all this we can say that the gift of the Church is a gift to us from God because of God's great affection and real esteem for us; in other words it is a sign of God's love for us. I have always believed that understanding the Church as God's gift to us is one of the best ways to think about the Church. It reminds us that before the Church is a gift we give to others, or the "young Church" is a gift young people give to the rest of the members of the Church, the Church is a gift from God to us.

In reality there is no such thing as the young Church, or the old Church, or the Australian Church. There is only the Church, not created by us but given to us, all of us, from the Lord. It is for this reason that young people have absolutely the same right as anyone else to claim the Church as a gift you have been given.

This Church, the Catholic Church, is the Church to which you have a right to belong. It is yours as much as it is mine as a bishop, or Pope Francis', or your parents' or your teachers' or anyone else's. It is your Church because it is God's Church and God is giving it to you. Welcome and embrace it with all your heart and help it to be the Church the Lord is calling it to be.

These reflections may well lead us to ask: what is the Church? What is this reality of which every single one of us is a vital part? In thinking about this question I want to talk about two ideas: one is from Pope John Paul II, and the other comes from Pope Francis. Both of them, ultimately, remind us that the Church is about Jesus. Jesus has to be at the heart of everything.

Pope John Paul II talked about the Church in many ways. One of his favourite expressions to describe the Church was that the Church is a community. A community forms when people have a sense that they belong to each other, that they are responsible for each other, and that they can depend on each other.

A very characteristic Catholic way of looking at the Church is the understanding that our faith is about us finding our way to God together. It is about all of us, together, helping each other find our way to God. This is because we are a community of disciples. A disciple of course is someone who is following in someone else's footsteps. This is a really important idea, because communities can easily fall into the trap of becoming inward looking, but we as a community should be outward looking. What this really means is that we should be looking beyond ourselves to the Lord. He is the one we want to take as our guide to a rich and happy and full life. After all we are not disciples just of anyone: we are disciples of Jesus Christ.

Whether we are talking about the young people of the Church, or the old people of the Church, or the healthy people of the Church, or the sick people of the Church, it doesn't really matter – it is all of us together who are forming this community of people who know that He, Jesus, is the one we are following.

One of the things which has struck me over the past few days is that this focus on Jesus has come through over and over and over again, including in so much of the music that we listen to or sing along with. So much of that music is pointing us away from ourselves to the Lord. I think this is a really key thing. Most of you will have heard the famous quote of Pope Francis that the



Church, in our time particularly, and in our world, needs to be “a healer of wounds and a warmer of hearts”.

The Church is made up of disciples of Christ, people who are following Jesus. When Pope Francis described the Church as “a healer of wounds and a warmer of hearts”, what I think he was tapping into was exactly the same thing that John Paul II was tapping into when he spoke of the Church as a community of disciples.

Why?

Because if you read through the Gospels, what you will find is that the man who emerges from the pages of these Gospels is a healer of people’s wounds and a warmer of people’s hearts. In so many of the stories we read in the gospels this is what we see. This is who Jesus is.

If we are going to be a community of his disciples, walking in his footsteps, then we have to be people who heal the wounds of others and warm the hearts of others. Maybe a question that each of you could take back to your own local community as an individual is this: how can we as a community of disciples in my parish, in my youth group, or in whatever other Catholic community I belong to, be healers, first of all of each other’s wounds, and then warmers of each other’s hearts

This then is what the Church is, and when you talk about the gifts of the Church through the world, the gift of God, this is what is God is creating. It is God’s plan that Jesus can and should be present in our world, healing people’s wounds and warming people’s hearts, in and through the Church: in and through us.

Everything I am saying is particularly true for young people who have found their way into the Church and are perhaps trying, and even struggling, to find a place for themselves in the Church. I really want to encourage you to see the Church not as a problem to be fixed or burden to be carried but as a gift from the Lord. When you do this, when you receive this gift gratefully from the Lord, then you in your turn become the Lord’s gift to everybody else.

Perhaps this is a simple way of explaining what the word ‘evangelisation’ means. We receive the gift, we accept it, we allow it to take root and to grow in our lives, we become the gift, and then we offer the gift to others.

We do always need to remember of course that this Church, first and foremost, is the Lord’s Church. People talk to me about our parish, our parish priests, and our programmes, and it is right that they do. We need to have a sense of ownership of the Church. But remember, before it is your parish, it is God’s parish. Before it is your youth group, it is the Lord’s youth group. Before it is our Church, it is His Church. I don’t think we will ever really understand the Church unless we understand this.

St Paul would say Christ is the head of the Church. If we don’t remember who the head of the Church is, and where the life of the Church really comes from, we may run the risk of trying to make the Church what we want it to be, when we should really be trying to help the Lord make it what He wants it to be.



Jesus is saying to us, His Church, “I am the Way, I am the Truth, I am the life”. What a gift you, the young people of the Church, will be if you lead the rest of us in following his Way, believing and acting on his Truth, and living his Life.

You don't have to get old in order to achieve something wonderful. Young people, you have within you the ability to be amongst the great heroes and heroines of the Christian story. Are you up for this challenge?

If you put Jesus at the heart of your life you will be amazed at the strength you discover within yourselves, which of course is really the strength of the Holy Spirit. You will be able to deal with the challenges and cope with the difficulties, which will inevitably come along as you try to live as disciples of Jesus. The key to it all is, as Saint Mary MacKillop would put it, to always remember who it is that you are following.