



Veritas 2018

Speech

Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment

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Tonight, as we gather at the end of a long, tiring, exciting and I am sure for some challenging day I have been asked to share some thoughts with you about the central theme of the upcoming Synod of Bishops for Young People, which takes place in Rome in October. This is of course also the theme of our festival this year and as you probably know it was inspired by the words of Pope Francis from World Youth Day in 2016 in Poland where he spoke about the role of the Church, and in a special way of young people in the Church, in terms of sharing the joy and the hope of the Risen Christ.

Any of you who know me at all, or who have listened to me speak, will know what I believe about the Church: about why it exists and what lies at the heart of everything in its life and how it can tell whether or not it is being faithful to the God who brought it into being in the first place. At a time in our history when the shocking failures of some bishops, priests, religious and other Church personnel have been laid bare for everyone to see – a time when many of those who love the Church are feeling ashamed, discouraged, angry and disillusioned – we really only have two options. The first would be to walk away, perhaps in disgust, perhaps in sorrow, perhaps in confusion, and to seek to live our lives apart from the Church.

The second would be to stick with the Church, in spite of its failings, and to see ourselves not as detached observers hoping that things will get better but as part of the re-building that now needs to take place. In a way, taking a lead from Pope Francis, we might see ourselves as being among those whom God has called, as he called St Francis of Assisi many hundreds of years ago, to “*go and rebuild the Church*”. These were the words Saint Francis, as a young man, heard when he was praying in front of a crucifix in a ruined chapel in the countryside around the town of Assisi in central Italy. At first Francis thought the Lord was asking him to rebuild the chapel. Only gradually did he begin to realise that the Lord was asking him to gather together a group of followers, most of whom were young men and, a bit later, young women, who in different ways would become leaders in a movement which would call the Church back to the ideals which were always at its heart in theory but which to a large extent had been lost in practice.

It would be a fantastic thing, if here in WA, we could begin to form an army of young people who, like St Francis and his early followers, are committed to helping the Church find its way back to the ideals which come from the Lord to his Church and which he is always holding out to us as the path to life lived as God meant it to be lived when he gave it to us. If we do this, and as we do this, we will, in the words of Pope Francis, be opening up new horizons for spreading joy. We will, in other words, be people who through our own lives are setting other people free to also live their



lives as God intends – and what God intends is that we have life and live it to the full. There is nothing more likely to bring us alive, and fill us with the joy of living, than to be people through whom God brings others to life. We are called by God and invited by God to receive this gift of life with great energy and enthusiasm, to grab it with both hands, to make the most of it in every way and in doing all this become people through whom God works to set other people free from all that is holding them back from living their lives to the full. And who wouldn't want to be this kind of person? Who wouldn't want to be a life-enhancer rather than a death dealer? Who wouldn't want to be a source of joy rather than a source of misery and suffering? The Church is given to us as a gift, and our life within the Church is given to us as a gift, precisely so that we can each day grow more and more into the kind of person God has created us to be and the kind of person that, in our hearts of hearts, we most want to be.

But of course the Church in practice, as opposed to the Church in theory, will only be this gift for us to the extent that the Church is being faithful to its own God-given identity. And at the heart of this identity, more important than anything else we can say about the Church, is its call to be a living, powerful, unambiguous, effective and clear sign of the ongoing presence of Jesus among his people as their saviour, their healer, their teacher, their leader, their forgiver, their renewer, their life-giver. And when I talk about the Church and its identity, I am talking about us, and our shared identity. Because this is what it means to belong to the Church: it means to be a vital and contributing and essential member of that group of people called together by God to be this living sign and bearer of the presence of the Lord Jesus among us.

When I became the Archbishop of Perth just over six years ago, I threw out a challenge to the whole Archdiocese that I have repeated often since. It is really a challenge for the Church throughout WA, for the Church throughout Australia and for the world-wide Church. But given that most of us here are part of the Church in the archdiocese of Perth, and nearly all of us are part of the Church in WA, it's good for us to, in a sense, keep this local. So the challenge I threw out was this: at this particular time in the history of the Church, there is an urgent need for us to return the Church to Christ and return Christ to the Church. We often talk about our Church, and in a sense this is good because it shows that we feel a sense of belonging to and responsibility for the Church. But there is a danger here because there is a temptation to think that if it is ours we can shape it any way we want. We need to remember that the Church is really his.

The Church is Christ's Church before it is ours, and it is ours only in the sense that we have received it as a gift from him. As with any gift we need to show respect to the giver and use some common sense in relation to the gift by making sure that we use it as it was intended, and when necessary go back to the manual from time to time, especially if things seem not to be working properly, and make sure that we are following the instructions given by the maker, the manufacturer. If we don't then we run the risk of wrecking the gift so that it no longer functions the way it should. In our own time, here in Australia, here in WA, here in Perth, we have to have the courage to ask the question: have we failed to respect the nature of the gift we have received from God? Have we failed to read the manual properly? Have we become a bit arrogant and presumed that we know better than the maker and giver of the gift? If there is any truth in any of this then perhaps this is God's way of saying to us, as he did through the crucifix hanging on the wall of that ruined chapel in Assisi, that the time has come for us to let God, through us, rebuild his Church which is falling into ruins.



For us as Catholics, the manual given to us by the maker of the gift which is the Church is the gospels. They reveal to us the identity and the mind and heart of Jesus who is himself the face of the Father's mercy. To be a part of the Church is, before anything else, to be a person who wants to be, and is trying to be, and knows that he or she is called to be, a disciple of Jesus.

Disciples of course are people who know that they have a teacher from whom they learn, a leader whom they follow and, if I can put it this way, a lover upon whom they can depend. Disciples are people who look beyond themselves, and even ultimately beyond the other disciples, to someone else – and in the case of Christians to Jesus. We are people who realise that if we want to know which path to follow, when a whole lot of different pathways lie open before us, we should follow the path, the way, Jesus has already laid out for us because we take him at his word when he says *"I am the Way"*. We are people who realise that when we are trying to work out who to believe and what to believe, especially in terms of how best to live our lives as God intends them to be lived, then our best bet is to measure and evaluate everything in terms of what Jesus says and does, in terms of how Jesus acts in particular situations. At a time when there is fake news, and spin, and all kinds of people and movements claiming to have the truth about all sorts of things, and those so-called truths are often in complete contradiction to each other, we have committed ourselves to the one who says *"I am the Truth"*. And we are people who, when there are all sorts of theories around about what a truly good, truly beautiful, truly human life looks like, can confidently look to the example of Jesus who says *"I am the Life"*.

In all of this what I am really saying is this: being a part of the Church really means two things. Firstly it means being someone who recognises, even if initially only in a vague and questioning and even uncertain way, that my life will only really begin to make sense to me and start moving in the really positive and joyful and energising direction I want it to move in if I find room in my mind and in my heart, in other words in my life, for Jesus. Secondly it means being someone who recognises, again perhaps for some in the same vague and questioning and uncertain way, that the Church, in spite of the limitations and failings of so many of its people including its leaders, is the community given to us by the Lord as the privileged place in which we can encounter him, learn to know and love him, and grow in our determination to serve him and be faithful to him. Think of the Church without Jesus absolutely at its heart, and you end up with a purely human institution which has done and continues to do lots of good things but which is also marked by so many limitations that its future needs to be doubted. Think of Jesus without the Church and you are ultimately left with an exceptionally good man who bequeathed to the world an incredible example to follow, but who doesn't continue to be with us in any real way and so is unable to help us to follow this wonderful example, which it is in fact impossible to follow without his help.

The decision to be part of the Church is then, in the end, a decision based on a conviction about the importance of Jesus. That is a conviction that will only have power if it finds its home both in our heads and in our hearts. In other words it will never be enough to know about Jesus – although that is vitally important. We will also need to know Jesus. We will need to encounter him, spend time with him, and grow in our trust in him. And of course this is exactly what our life in the Church is meant to offer us; not just knowledge about Jesus but the chance of beginning, and developing, a relationship of real and genuine friendship with him. Often people ask the question, when faced with a difficult situation, *"What would Jesus do?"* It is a very important question though not always an easy one to answer. Sometimes the person who asks the question, especially when they put it to someone else, has really already worked out what they want the person to do and they are trying to embarrass the person into agreeing with them by suggesting that any other course of



action would be a betrayal of Jesus himself. I think we would have to be very confident about our own grasp of the truth about Jesus before we started using this kind of approach with people. I think the more important question to ask is *“Why would I even want to know what Jesus would do?”* *What is it about him that would lead me to want to be his disciple in the first place?* This is the real challenge of this Veritas Festival. It is the real question that has to be answered before we can begin to commit ourselves to being people who welcome new opportunities for sharing the joy and hope of the Risen Christ as Pope Francis encourages us to do. We have to start the journey of discipleship before we can continue the journey. We have to take the first step before we can take the next one. And then, once that has happened, we have to have the courage to keep walking along the path, even when we come across pot holes, or muddy patches, or fallen trees, or other obstacles, or we are just too tired and our feet are blistered and all we want to do is give up.

There is a story about this in St John’s Gospel which I want to leave with you as we soon enter into a period of quiet reflection and prayer to bring our evening to a conclusion. It comes from chapter six of Saint John’s gospel. I won’t read the whole story – it is a little long – but let me just give you the main points.

Chapter six starts with the account of Jesus feeding at least five thousand people and probably many more – the gospel talks about five thousand men but there would certainly have been many women and children as well. Jesus does this by taking what the disciples have been able to put together – five loaves of bread and two fish – and transforming them into enough food to feed the whole crowd. This incident is followed by Jesus coming across the water in the midst of a storm to meet his disciples who were in a boat and were terrified by the power of the wind and waves. The next day the people who had been in the crowd the day before came searching for Jesus because they were so amazed at the miracle. Then Jesus began to talk to them, describing himself as the bread of life. Only those, he said, who eat this bread of life can have eternal life.

The story makes clear that Jesus was not speaking metaphorically but quite literally, because the crowds began to complain and to argue about what Jesus was saying. Some were angry that he said he was the Bread that had come down from heaven, because they couldn’t believe that a person whose family they knew could dare to somehow or other equate himself with God. Others were confused because it sounded like Jesus really meant that they were supposed to eat his flesh and drink his blood and this sounded both stupid and gruesome to them. Jesus didn’t back away from what he was saying. He didn’t say, *“Look, you have misunderstood me. Of course I don’t mean this literally. I am only speaking figuratively”*. On the contrary he said to them, *“My flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood live in me and I live in them”*. The result of all of this is that, as the Gospel puts it, *“many of his disciples left him and stopped going with him”*. In the end, what Jesus was saying to them was just too hard to accept – and because they couldn’t accept this, they lost faith in him, decided that he was not really worth following after all, and they walked away. The same thing of course happens all the time. Lots of people are happy to see themselves as disciples of Jesus until something comes along that they just can’t stomach, some teaching in the Gospel or in the Church’s formal tradition that is too challenging or confronting for them, and they either walk away or, in some ways even worse, convince themselves that they know better than the Gospel writers, or the Church, and so they conveniently put to one side the things they find too difficult rather than set out on the journey of deeper reflection.



Then comes the crux of the story. As he watches so many of his disciples walk away, Jesus turns to the twelve apostle, his closest followers, and says to them, *“What about you, do you want to go away too?”* And then Peter speaks up – Peter always does this as the leader of the Twelve – and he makes an extraordinary act of faith which is really at the heart of everything I have been trying to say this evening. “Lord,” he says, *“to whom can we go? You have the message of eternal life and we believe, we know, that you are the Holy One of God”*.

Do you see how Peter instinctively understands that at the heart of everything stands Jesus, not just a good man or even the best man who ever lived, but the man who, incredibly, is the Holy One of God and who therefore can be believed and trusted, even when what he says or what he asks seems ridiculous or impossible or out of our reach? The Church exists to keep the memory and the truth and the living reality of Jesus alive and vibrant and accessible to all. We have been celebrating and living this reality of the presence of Jesus among us all through our festival so far. Jesus is with us in the community we are building over these days. He is with us in the people who have spoken to us and shared their stories. He is with us in the people who have led us in song and in prayer and praise, in the priests who have joined us to remind us of Jesus as our Good Shepherd, in the religious who are among us recalling for us the centrality of God not just in their lives but in our lives as well, in the fun, and the laughter, and perhaps for some the tears and the doubts and the uncertainties in their hearts. We are soon to find ourselves very powerfully in his presence in the Blessed Sacrament, where the words we have just heard from Saint John’s Gospel begin to make sense: *I am the Bread of Life. The one who comes to me will never be hungry. The one who believes in me will never be thirsty*”. He is the one who is calling us to go and rebuild his Church. He is the one who is sending us out to seize new opportunities for sharing the joy and hope of the Risen Christ. He is our Way: let’s follow him, He is our Truth: let’s believe in him. He is our Life: let’s live in him and welcome him to live in us.