



Australian Catholic Youth Festival 2019
Listening to God: how do we know what God is saying?

Speech

By the Most Rev Timothy Costelloe SDB
Archbishop of Perth

Sunday 8 December 2019
Perth Convention & Exhibition Centre

(Slide One)

Listening to God: how do we know what God is saying?

(Slide Two)

Christ is alive! He is our hope, and in a wonderful way he brings youth to our world, and everything he touches becomes young, new, full of life. The very first words, then, that I would like to say to every young Christian are these: Christ is alive and he wants you to be alive!

These are the words which Pope Francis uses to begin the letter he wrote in March of this year to the young people of the Church and of the world. They are words that I would like to borrow and make my own as we begin this time together today. *Christ is alive and he wants you to be alive* – not just existing but living, fully, freely, enthusiastically and filled with hope.

You have gathered here in Perth from all over Australia for this Australian Catholic Youth Festival. You come from different places, you have very different and unique experiences, you have your own questions and you carry in your hearts your own hopes for the future. Some of you are here because you have already discovered the positive role your Catholic faith can play in your lives. Others are here perhaps wondering if it is in fact true that being a Catholic is important and can add something really vital and energising to your lives. Others again might be here because you have lots of questions about the faith and the Church, and among *this* group there may be some, perhaps many, who are doubtful or sceptical about any real prospects of discovering answers that make sense to you.



The first thing I want to say is that wherever you are on this journey of faith, this journey of discovery, this journey of questioning, you are all equally welcome. I hope you do feel that way and I hope too that you see part of your role here over these few days as making sure that others feel welcome too, even and perhaps especially those who see things differently from you.

(Slide Three - Pause for reflection)

What have I brought with me to this Youth Festival?

Excitement?

Anticipation?

Enthusiasm?

Questions and/or doubts?

Curiosity?

Hope?

Uncertainty?

Faith?

An open heart?

A closed mind?

Confusion?

Something else?

Are you willing to carry what you have brought with you throughout these days?

Are you willing to wait for God in the hope that God might lead you forward from where you are to a new place?

The very next thing I want to say, returning to the words of Pope Francis, is that this Youth Festival is all about Jesus Christ. I am absolutely convinced that nothing about the Catholic Church will ultimately make any sense at all unless it is looked at as being, in one way or other, connected to Jesus – and, as Pope Francis would remind us, not a Jesus who is simply a great man from the distant past who left a great legacy behind him, but a person who is still alive today, who is interested in us, who wants to be involved in our life, and who wants to help us live our life to the full.

(Slide Four) He is someone who wants to walk with us, lift us up when we are struggling, sit with us when we are alone or afraid, and celebrate with us when we are happy. In all this he wants to say to us: your life matters, you matter, and I want to help you live your life as fully, and deeply, and enthusiastically, and fruitfully as you can – that's why I gave you the gift of life in the first place.

When I say that *nothing* in the Church will make any sense unless it is connected to Jesus, I really mean *nothing*. The Mass, which is such an important part of the experience of being Catholic, is



meant to be all about Jesus, our relationship with him, and because of this relationship, our relationship with ourselves, with each other, and with the world around us. Our Catholic schools, which so many of you go to or used to go to, have no real reason for existing, especially in a country like ours where the government already provides good schools, unless our schools are about bringing to their students the fundamental aspect of faith in Jesus, without which a full education is just not possible. The moral positions the Church upholds, sometimes in the face of great opposition and hostility today, make no ultimate sense if they are just seen as arbitrary rules to follow, rather than essential aspects of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

All this means that Christianity generally, and certainly the Catholic tradition of Christianity, before it is about anything else, is about Jesus, Jesus alive, Jesus among us, Jesus calling to us, Jesus inviting us to be his followers, his disciples, his friends. Everything else about Catholic Christianity flows from this: our liturgy, our prayer traditions, our social outreach efforts, our concern for justice and the environment, our moral traditions and teachings - they all point to Christ and flow out from Christ and we won't make sense of them, or find them compelling, or trust them, until we begin to make sense of Jesus, and find him compelling, and begin to trust him.

In the end this is what the ACYF is about – so in these few days together take the chance to meet Jesus, possibly in the most unlikely of places or the most unexpected of encounters – and let him show you what he has to offer you.

Of course, to speak of an encounter with Jesus is to presume that he is here, that he wants to meet you, that he will speak to you. But is this true? And if so, how does it work?

Of course everyone is different, unique, specially created by God and for that reason it is quite likely that God will speak to each of us, at least some of the time, in different ways. I can only tell you how I believe God has spoken to me and invite you, in the light of my experience, to think about your own situation, your own experiences, your own hopes and dreams – and try to see if, hidden within them, there might not be the voice of God. And at the outset let me say that often, at least for me, it is only in looking back and reflecting on the things that have been a part of my life, that I have come to realise that God was whispering to me, or sometimes shouting at me, and that, at times almost unconsciously, I was responding to those whisperings in ways that carried me forward and led me to certain places, certain people and certain decisions.

These days, especially when I visit young people preparing for their Confirmation, I am often asked why I wanted to be a bishop or how I knew that God was calling me to be a priest. I always explain that I didn't want to be a bishop, and certainly didn't apply for the job – it is a role that a person is asked to accept by the Pope: but it was my decision to walk away from my normal life and enter a religious order, the Salesians, and eventually to study for the priesthood. I made that decision when I was twenty-three. **(Slide Five)** It was my choice, of course – no-one forced it on me – but I am often reminded of some words of Jesus to the first people he chose to follow him in a particular way: *“You did not choose me – no I chose you.”* It is strange now to look back and



think that all the time, while I thought I was making choices and decisions about my future – and of course in a very real sense I was – behind it all, often unrecognised by me, God was at work leading me where he was inviting me to go. I always had the opportunity to say “no” to the invitation – God does not force himself on any of us – but my own experience tells me that God has created us for a particular purpose and he keeps on leading us in ways that constantly put his plan before us, giving us the opportunity to take up the challenge, take the risk and say “yes”.

This of course is not just true for people God calls to be priests or brothers or religious sisters: this is true for all of us. For example, God’s plan, it seems to me, for the majority of people is that they fall in love, get married and have a family. But not everyone marries the first person they go out with. Often people have many boyfriends or girlfriends before something happens and they suddenly realise, even if they can’t quite explain it, that they have fallen in love and somehow know that if they are going to be who they are meant to be, they need to spend the rest of their life with this other person. We might well imagine Jesus saying to someone: *You did not choose your partner, no, I chose him (or her) for you. – and now I commission you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.* The fantastic thing about this, of course, is that God is not just interested in those who become priests, brothers or nuns. God is interested in every one of us, God has a plan, a project, for each of one of us, and that plan, that project is that, in discovering what God is asking of us and where God is leading us, we are discovering the path that will bring us to the fullness of life that God had in mind when he created us in the first place.

So – how do you know? How can you tell what God is asking? One of the key ways is to learn to read your heart. This might sound a bit vague, or even a bit sentimental, but what it really means is learning how to recognise what really matters to you, what is most important and precious to you, and then working through a pretty basic question: *is what I am reading in my heart, or in my life-story, or in my hopes and dreams, compatible with everything else I know about God, about God’s Church and about what those whom I trust implicitly are saying to me?*

This might all sound a bit theoretical so let me share with you a few things from my own journey that might make it all a bit clearer. But remember, we are all different, we are all unique, we are all in particular ways blessed by God with different gifts, different capabilities, different personalities. You are not supposed to be like me any more than I am supposed to be like you. We are who we are as God created us. In telling you something of my own story I am simply inviting you to begin to retell our own unique story to yourself.

As some of you have heard me say before, one of my earliest memories of being a part of the Church was standing in the foyer of our parish church, St Peter’s (in East Benteigh for those who come from Melbourne), and looking at the statue of Saint Anthony of Padua which was there in the Church porch.

(Slide six) The statue was something like the image up on the screen. I can’t remember how old I was. I think I was already an altar server so I must have been at least 8 or 9 years old. I



didn't really know anything much about Saint Anthony but I was intrigued by the statue and especially by the way Saint Anthony and the child were looking at each other. The image on the screen isn't exactly the same as the statue I was looking at but the key thing is that the two people in the image, Saint Anthony and Jesus, are looking at each other with what I would now describe as a "look of love". As I look back now as an adult on the little boy I was at that time I think I must have realised, without being able to express it very clearly, that our religion, our Catholic faith, is first and foremost about a relationship of love between us and God. God wasn't someone to be frightened of, someone who was distant from us and unconcerned about us, so far above us that we couldn't reach him: God was close and loving and able to be loved. I think now that most of my understanding of our Catholic faith, and I have spent most of my life learning about and teaching our Catholic faith, is based on that very simple but very significant realisation: God loves me, and I can love God. God cares for me and I can trust myself to him. And later, for me at least as I considered the possibility of becoming a member of a religious order and a priest, God really was someone to whom you could give your whole life, in much the same way as most people give their whole life to their husband or wife and to their children.

If you were to ask me now I would say that God was speaking to me through that statue letting me know, in ways that I couldn't have put into words at that time, what part God intended to play in my life.

I want to pause here just for a moment. I want to invite you, very quietly, to try and recapture some of your earliest memories. They might, like mine, have something to do with the Church or they might have nothing to do with the Church. They might, like mine, be very positive, but they might also be negative, sad memories. But as you recall them now you might, from your perspective as an older person, ask yourself what God might have been revealing to you in those experiences. You have recalled them, from all the many things that happened to you, so they must have been significant, and probably still are. If they are happy memories, thank God for them. If they are confusing ask God to help you understand their meaning. If they are hurtful or painful, ask God to bring some healing and some peace. But then, perhaps most of all, ask God to help you bring whatever he was trying to do for you in or through those experiences, and the way you remember them, into the present so that God can lead you into the future.

(Slide 7 - Pause for reflection)

The idea that God might have a plan for us worries or disturbs some people because it seems to suggest that we aren't free to build our own lives. I said earlier that I believe God has created us for a particular purpose and he keeps on leading us in ways that constantly put his plan before us, giving us the opportunity to take up the challenge, take the risk and say "yes", and I also suggested that discovering what this plan is and doing our best to fit in with it is the best way to a happy life.



We all make mistakes, or course, and sometimes very bad ones. Lots of people make decisions which bring great suffering to them and to many others. We can't pretend that this isn't true and we know that sometimes we have no choice other than to accept the consequences for our actions. These consequences aren't signs of an angry God punishing us – they are simply the inevitable result of what we may have done or failed to do. God respects our freedom, including the freedom to make bad choices that bring us suffering.

Other people seem to drift through life never making any real commitment at all and never perhaps finding any real purpose or meaning in their lives.

Others again make a very clear decision to exclude God from their lives, or to live in the conviction that there is no God. And then there are people who genuinely try to work out what God is asking of them, but seem to be always missing the mark. It's important, I think, to say two things about this. Real freedom is not the freedom to do whatever we like when we like, but rather the freedom to always be able to choose what is best, rather than what is ultimately negative or destructive. We shouldn't be afraid that if we let God into our lives we will lose our freedom or live a constrained and limited life. The very opposite is actually true. The happiest people seem to be those who have discovered how to live generous and light-hearted and peaceful lives rather than selfish, heavy-hearted and angry lives, even in the midst of suffering and trouble.

(Slide eight) I remember being at a meeting in Rome when John Paul II was still Pope. He was already showing signs of the Parkinson's disease which would eventually kill him, he had to walk with a stick and he had an uncontrollable tremor in his right hand. One night he joined all the bishops and other people for dinner (I was not yet a bishop at that time) and as he left he used his walking stick as a kind of baton to lead us all in singing a very rousing song. He was clearly a very happy man, in spite of his suffering. He eventually died after a long and terrible illness and now, or course, he is Saint John Paul II. He is a good example of someone who had learned to read his heart, recognise God's voice, and with his courage in both hands follow God's call. This brought him a peace that even terrible suffering couldn't destroy.

Even when we don't do this, and most of us fail much of the time, God doesn't give up on us, or walk away. Nothing we do, no mistake we make, can ultimately frustrate God's plans to bring us to happiness. The only way we can do that is to stubbornly and persistently and deliberately turn our backs on God and decide that that is the way we like it and nothing will convince us otherwise. This, of course, is the very opposite of reading our hearts: it is refusing to read our hearts. It is deciding to live purely on the surface and never give room to what lies deepest in us. It is a recipe for a miserable existence – and sadly that is the way lots of people live their lives.

So listening to God does not take away our choices. Rather it makes our choices even more significant. I want to reflect with you on this for a few moments.



When I became the Archbishop of Perth in 2012 I decided it was time to choose a new motto for myself. If you get a chance to go up to Saint Mary's Cathedral while you are here in Perth you will see my crest and my motto above the bishop's chair in the sanctuary.

In many ways my choice of motto is an expression of that conviction I came to as a little boy looking at that statue of Saint Anthony – the conviction that Jesus was someone I could trust and someone to whom I could offer my life as a gift. I choose three words from Saint John's gospel, three words which Jesus uses to describe himself: *"I am the Way"*, he says, *"I am the Truth and I am the Life"*.

(Slide 9) For someone who is trying to take Jesus seriously these words are pretty challenging. If we are asking ourselves how to hear what God is saying to us, and we believe, as Christians do, that Jesus is God among us as one of us, then what Jesus says and does, and the way Jesus acts, is a very clear and in a sense obvious way for us to make sure that we are on the right track.

Jesus, as we read about him in the gospels, sets out in all kinds of ways the path for us to follow. He does it with words but he equally, and sometimes more powerfully, does it with actions. If he is the **Way**, that is the path we should follow, the road we should tread, the example we should imitate, then we have a pretty clear direction for our lives. Of course this is not as easy as it sounds. There are some fantastic things about Jesus which everyone admires, including people who are not Christians or not religious. His rejection of violence, for example, is something admired by many people. His readiness to forgive people who treat him badly, even to the point of killing him, is also a quality which people admire and marvel at. His insistence on love, his understanding of people who struggle and fail, his compassion for people who are suffering: these are all remarkable and admirable qualities which most people would like to see in others, and also in themselves. I think most people would agree that in these areas his way is certainly worth following and lots of people try, even though they, and we, often fail to live up to this high example. The trouble, of course, is that not everything about Jesus and his way is quite so appealing. When he tells us, for example, that we should love our enemies and do good to those who hate us this can be a bit hard to take. And when he then tells us that in fact there is never a time when you should not forgive, this just seems impossible to many of us. How often after all, do we say that what someone has done to us, or someone we know, is "unforgiveable"? But this can never be the case if we are following the Way of Jesus. Because he didn't just say these things: he lived these things.

And then there is the idea that Jesus calls himself the **Truth**. He asks us to believe in what he says and to believe in him. And in Christian terms to *"believe in"* means also to *"trust"*. Some of the things Jesus teaches us are very beautiful and consoling. When he tells us that God will deal with us as the father deals with his young son in the story of the Prodigal Son, while we might find it almost too good to be true in the end we find ourselves wanting to believe it precisely because it is so good: that God waits patiently for us to come to our senses and come back to him; that God does not exact vengeance or mete out punishment because we have treated him badly but



rather figuratively throws his arms around us when we come back, just as the father literally threw his arms around his son when he came back. But when Jesus also says that if we don't forgive our brother or sister when they hurt us, then God will not forgive us our sins either, then we don't really want to believe this and perhaps do our best to explain it away. But Jesus doesn't explain away teachings that are hard to take. They remain true whether people like them or not. So when Jesus tells the people that he will give them his flesh and blood to eat, and that his flesh is real food and his blood is real drink, and the people think he is crazy and walk away, he doesn't run after them and tell them they have misunderstood him, that he didn't really mean it, that he hadn't explained himself properly. No, he lets them walk away – he leaves them free just as he leaves us free – and he simply turns to his disciples and says to them. *“Are you going to walk away too?”* Jesus at times will say some hard things to us and make some hard demands of us. He did it with his disciples, he did it with the people of his own time and place generally, and he does it today, especially through his Church. He offers us the truth, and if in the end we find we can't stomach it he won't stop us from walking away but nor will he turn back from the truth he puts before us. What he will do is wait patiently, exactly like the father in the story of the prodigal son, until we come back.

(slide ten) and if we don't come back then he will, like the good shepherd who loses one of his sheep who has wandered off into the wilderness, set out and go in search of the sheep till he finds it. But even then he won't drag that sheep back to the flock. He will offer to take the sheep on his shoulders and carry it home, but the sheep will have to be willing, and sometimes of course the sheep is only willing because he is too exhausted to do anything else.

When we ask ourselves how God speaks to us, and how we are to recognise his voice, one of the greatest challenges for us is to be ready to hear that voice when it is uncomfortable and confronting. God, in Jesus and with the Spirit, speaks to us in the Gospels and speaks to us in the Church and speaks to us in others and speaks to us in the events of our lives. But we have to have the courage to listen – and the even greater courage it will take to say “yes”.

I have already mentioned just a few examples of things Jesus says to us in his life and in his teachings as we find them in the gospels. As Catholics we also believe that God speaks to us in and through his Church. This happens in all kinds of ways. The liturgy of the Church, especially, of course, the Mass, but also the other sacraments and the whole life of prayer within the Church, is one of the main ways in which God speaks to us, and we speak to God. I don't know if you have ever thought of this, but it is possible to know a whole lot about God and not really know God at all. It is the people who pray, much more than the people who study religion, who really get to know God – and when you know someone you are much more likely to understand them and begin to appreciate what really matters to them, how they really feel about you, and what part they might be able to play in your life.

God also speaks to us through the teachings of the Church. It is easy for us to fall into the trap of thinking that the Church is just another human institution and if we do think that way then we



are likely to wonder why we need to listen to what the leaders of the Church have to say. After all, they are as human, and as prone to failure, and as open to making mistakes, as the rest of us. But if we remember that this very human institution is also created by God, and empowered in a special way by God to keep alive the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, then we will realise that God is alive and active in the Church, his Church, and that he will seek to lead us, his people, through the Church, including its leaders and including its formal teachings. So, if we really do want to know what God might be saying to us, as individuals, or as a community, we will want to listen to the Church and allow ourselves to be guided by the Church.

Just as it can be confronting to deal with some of the things Jesus said and did, so it can be a challenge, especially perhaps at this time in our history, to take seriously the guidance of the Church which comes to us through our leaders. This is where all those really difficult social and moral issues come into view. More often than not, the society in which we live will be pointing us in one direction, and the guidance of the Church will be pointing us in another. Catholics who want to really know what God is asking of them will be keen to know what the Church teaches, and if they find it difficult to understand or accept, they will do their best to take the teachings seriously, and their own ideas and positions seriously, and seek to discover how they might be reconciled: and if they can't then Catholics will try to have the courage to face the dilemma with courage, humility and faith. Could it be that I've got it wrong? Could it be that society's values, or the influence of my friends, are misleading me? Could it be that, hard though it is, what the Church is telling me comes from God?

It might be good here just to pause for a few moments. Let your mind think over some of the particular issues you struggle with in terms of the Church's teaching. Let your questions rise up in your mind and face them honestly. If the Church in its formal teaching is saying one thing – and your experience or your heart seems to be saying another – then ask the Lord to help you see the issues more clearly and to give you the honesty and courage to deal with them openly. It may be that even during this festival the Lord might be wanting to lead you forward in relation to some of your challenges – are you willing to let him do that?

(Slide 11 - Pause for reflection)

Another way in which God speaks to us is through the events of our lives. Sometimes these events might be obvious to all, though what God might be saying through them might not be so clear. It seems to me, at least, that one example of this might be the whole question of the state of the environment. Here in Perth the statistics show that annual average rainfall has dropped by something like 20 per cent in the last 50 years. Many scientists suggest that this new lower level of annual rainfall is now to be regarded as permanent. People argue about the causes of climate change, of which the lower rainfall is a pretty good example, but that we are being called by God to reconsider the ways in which we care for the creation seems very clear.



As well as these big global issues there are also the individual realities of our own lives. Many of you are still in full-time or part-time education, at school or university. You are in the process of deciding what to do with the life God has given you. How are you going to decide? What criteria will you use to make judgments about your next steps? Most of you will eventually decide to marry? How will you know if you have found the right person? What part might God and his Church play in your thinking?

Part of this process of deciding, this discernment about your future, will require you to truly know yourself. What are your strengths? What are your limitations? What is your heart telling you about your deepest desires? What makes you smile? What makes you feel proud of yourself? What are the choices you have made in the past, some big and some small, able to tell you about yourself? Is there a big gap between what you wish were true about yourself and what is actually true about yourself? Who or what have been major influences on your life journey so far? Who in your story so far has helped you to be the best person you can be? Who has prevented this from happening? What is this telling you about yourself? And what does our Catholic faith tell you about yourself as being created by God, passionately loved by God, deeply understood by God? What have been your positive experiences of the Church – the negative experiences?

I know I am throwing lots of questions at you today, but behind them is my conviction that God does speak to us in all these questions – and the answers we are able to give to them. The challenge, of course, is to find ways of creating spaces in our lives, physical spaces and mental spaces, where we can actually consider all these questions, sit quietly with them, talk calmly and deeply with people we trust about them, and somehow or other bring them with us when we turn to God – and then wait patiently for God to show us a way forward.

One woman who knew how to do this was Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mary plays an important part in Catholic life and the reason for that is that as the Mother of Jesus, she is and always will be vitally concerned for anyone who is important to her Son, and that of course includes us.

One of the things the gospels tell us about Mary is that she was a woman who treasured the things that happened to her and pondered over them in her heart. In this brief description we get a blueprint for how to go about discernment, for trying to really listen to what God is saying to us. Rather than just living our lives frantically rushing from one thing to another, or constantly distracting ourselves by filling our lives with noise and movement, our faith, our Catholic tradition, and in a way our own common sense, would prompt us to treasure the story of our lives, ponder over it calmly, peacefully and quietly, and allow this treasuring and this pondering to open us up to the voice of God's Spirit.

(Slide 12)

Pope Francis speaks about this very strongly in his letter to young people where, in fact, he quotes from one of his earlier writings.



“The Lord speaks to us in a variety of ways, at work, through others and at every moment. Yet we simply cannot do without the silence of prolonged prayer, which enables us better to perceive God’s language, to interpret the real meaning of the inspirations we believe we have received, to calm our anxieties and to see the whole of our existence afresh in his own light”. Yet this silence does not make us close in on ourselves. “We must remember that prayerful discernment has to be born of an openness to listening – to the Lord and to others, and to reality itself, which always challenges us in new ways. Only if we are prepared to listen, do we have the freedom to set aside our own partial or insufficient ideas... In this way, we become truly open to accepting a call that can shatter our security, but lead us to a better life. It is not enough that everything be calm and peaceful. God may be offering us something more, but in our comfortable inadvertence, we do not recognize it”.

This kind of prayerful listening, this treasuring and pondering, is exactly what Mary did – and it gave her the freedom to say “yes” to God. It can do the same for us. And, as Mary’s story tells us, when you say “yes” to God everything is possible. The problem is, it is not always easy to say “yes”.

As Catholics we are very used to the idea of asking Mary, who lives in heaven and shares the love and concern of Jesus for us, to pray for us and accompany us on our own journey of life.

(Slide 13). As you may know Pope Francis is very focused on this role of Mary in the life of the Church and in the lives of the disciples of Jesus. One of his favourite images of Mary is of her as the *Untier of Knots*. The idea is that, through her prayer for us, Mary helps us to sort out the mess we sometimes create in our lives, and unties the tangled knots we often create for ourselves. How often we use the expression that someone has tied him or herself up in knots trying to work something out. Mary’s prayers can help us to untangle this mess; and this too, this long marian tradition in the Church, is one of the ways in which God will speak to us.

I started this workshop with the words of Pope Francis and I would like to finish with the same words:

Christ is alive! He is our hope, and in a wonderful way he brings youth to our world, and everything he touches becomes young, new, full of life. The very first words, then, that I would like to say to every young Christian are these: Christ is alive and he wants you to be alive!