



THE ARCHBISHOP OF BRISBANE

LISTENING LEARNING PRAYING

An Advent Pastoral Letter

At a time when the average age of Catholics in Australia is 59, it has been good to celebrate the Year of Youth which is now coming to an end. Perhaps it would've been better to have a decade of youth, but the year was a promising start.

One thing that happened in the Year of Youth was the world-wide Synod of Bishops in Rome, which showed that Pope Francis has his finger on the pulse. It was different from other Synods because this time young people took part and spoke with their own voice. The rest of the Church, especially the bishops, was invited to listen.

Not just in Rome but everywhere, the Year of Youth has been a time for the whole Church to listen to the voices of young people who often feel unheard in the Church. The young inhabit different cultural, social and religious worlds than do those of us who are older. But their deepest hopes and longings, even if expressed in different accents, are familiar to us all, because they are so deeply human.

Those hopes and longings find voice in a special way through the days of Advent when the whole Church cries out, "Come, Lord Jesus!" In the end, all of us, young and old, yearn for Jesus, often in ways we scarcely recognise. Who of us doesn't want peace and joy? We all do, because the human heart is made for them. But they can be found only in the encounter with the Risen Lord, apart from whom we find only cosmetic peace and cosmetic joy. But there's nothing cosmetic in him, which is why the restless heart finds rest in him.

The Year of Youth has been a time for whole Catholic community – lay people, religious, deacons, priests, bishops – to reach out to meet young people where they are, walk with them on the way and listen to them as we take the road together. At times we've done this well, at other times less well, perhaps slipping back into ways we hoped we'd left behind. But everything that's been done has been only the start of a long journey together.

As we enter the time of Advent and Christmas this year, I encourage you to engage afresh with family and friends, learning to listen to them in new ways, especially to those who are younger. We won't always get it right, but the more we open the ears of our heart, the more we discover the power of listening to one another, as we allow God to transform us through other people. That's the grace God offers through the season of Advent and Christmas.

Listening to each other means telling our stories to each other. We are often very private about our faith, but young people need to hear our story of faith, our journey of discipleship. You may think you have nothing much to share, but that's not what others think, especially the young.

Telling the story of our faith can make us vulnerable, but there's nothing to fear in that, because often to tell of our vulnerability is to tell the story of our true strength and the power of God's mercy in our life. To love others means to hear their story, and to let them hear ours.

Love means being vulnerable and allowing others to be vulnerable before us. Look for ways and moments, then, when you can speak of what God has done and is doing in your life. Bear witness in that way as you walk with young people on the journey of faith. You'll be surprised by the effect it has, and you'll grow stronger by your truth-telling. As I've said elsewhere: "If the young are given the right experience, then the Catholic Church is still the greatest show on earth and Jesus as irresistibly attractive now as he ever was". You need to be part of that experience.

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By the influence of the Holy Spirit, the Year of Youth in Australia has coincided with preparations for the Plenary Council in 2020. The Plenary Council is about the future of the Catholic Church in Australia – the whole Church, which is what the unusual word “plenary” means. Pope Francis often speaks of the need for us to become a “synodal” Church. That’s another unusual word, but it means a Church where God speaks not just to some of the bishops some of the time but to all the baptised all the time. In that sense, the Plenary Council has already begun, because it’s more a process than an event. The process has three phases – preparation, celebration and implementation; and the first phase of preparation is well and truly under way.

A Plenary Council isn’t just a talkfest or a political jamboree. It’s the whole Church gathered by the Holy Spirit in order to make decisions about the future according to the mind of God. This means we’re on a journey of discernment, seeking to listen to the voice of the Spirit to see what the Spirit is saying to us about the future.

As we prepare for the Plenary Council, we’re offered an opportunity to enter more deeply into dialogue with one another. In the Gospels, Jesus knows what is in a person (cf John 2:24) and how to listen to what the heart of the other is saying. Jesus doesn’t begin with a big pronouncement; he takes time to engage with people and usually starts with a question.

We too need to be a people who know how to engage with others as Jesus did, to listen before we speak, lest we talk at people rather than with them. As one theologian has said: “This pilgrim Church will be most faithful to its truest identity when all the baptised acknowledge the wisdom of listening before speaking, of learning before teaching, of praying before pronouncing” (Richard Gaillardetz, Jamison, 2013, p. 55).

So as the Year of Youth comes to an end, we remain faithful to the path traced by the Holy Spirit through these twelve months, listening before we speak, learning before we teach and praying before we pronounce. Following that path, we will come to recognise and adore the Child who is God-with-us, the newborn Saviour who is “joy for all the people” (Luke 2:10).

Archbishop of Brisbane
First Sunday of Advent 2018