

YOUNG PEOPLE FINDING A PLACE IN THE CHURCH?

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I would like to start by thanking you for the opportunity to be with you this weekend and address the topic *Young People Finding a Place in the Church*. Last night, Michael (a participant) identified a current reality in our Church – where are the young people? The Church is facing a significant challenge regarding the diminishing presence of young people. This reality is something that has been at the forefront of my mind this year in particular, as I have been reflecting on the wonderful, determined, capable and inspirational young people that leave my school at the end of each year. I teach the VCE subject Religion and Society, so I have the good fortune of objectively nutting out life’s big existential questions with these young people and demonstrating how the Church can indeed answer these questions, and even give Catholic adherents a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. Nevertheless, I watch them leave at the end of November every year. These young people are curious and have a good grounding of Catholic belief, but need opportunities to live out what they study. The Plenary Council and my academic studies this year have been a personal impetus for me to consider how to address this challenge. For the last semester, I have been driving up from Geelong to attend a theology subject at Catholic Theological College. I am the only woman in that class and one of four lay people. The rest of the class is comprised of seminarians who are of a similar age to myself. Every Tuesday, as I look around the class, I am reminded that we are the future Church, but as I acknowledge that I am not a typical young Catholic, I ask: where are the young people?

Let me go back to the topic: *Young People Finding a Place in the Church*. This topic requires that we consider three things: first, who are these young people, secondly what do we mean by the Church and lastly, what do we mean by place?

Who are these young people?

Despite being surrounded by ‘young people’ on a daily basis in a Catholic educational context, I was initially challenged by how to define ‘young people’ in preparation for today. According to the Church I, at the age of thirty, am

considered a young person. Yet the stage of life that I am navigating is vastly different to that of my Year 12s who are itching to finish their VCE exams and float off into the abyss of sleep-ins that the university academic year will afford them. Despite still falling within this category myself, in my professional capacity, ‘young people’ are those who are leaving or have left school and are navigating, often alone, the complexities of life.

‘Young people’ then, may constitute those who intermittently practice their faith, those who find mystery and comfort in the Tridentine mass, or those who may have been baptised, attended a Catholic school, but may not affiliate with the Catholic Church? I would suggest that those young people whose faith is predominantly nourished by a strong adherence and devotion to ritual and mystery, may have already found their place in the Church. Therefore, as an educator who is involved in the faith formation of young people, I am most concerned about those who may have been exposed to the Catholic faith at school, have a strong sense of service and are curious about their place in the world. In my experience, it is often these young people who are open to a relationship with a faith community, yet may not feel welcome in a physical church. As I have been returning practice exams to my Years 12, I have been enquiring whether they feel as though there is a place for young people like them in the Church today. Their initial response was often a flat ‘No,’ partly because they interpreted the question to mean a physical building. To them, churches are empty, cold and foreign places. It became apparent that these students, who have been studying with some intensity over the past year the fundamental and foundational beliefs of the Catholic Church, were limited in their ability to move beyond a physical building when considering a place in the Church for them personally. Perhaps we have been too? But why?

Defining ‘Church’

On studying the Reformation, my Year 12s analysed the relationship between the Catholic Church and society, concluding that they were inextricably linked. The Church ultimately informed every aspect of life from the social to the cultural to the political. This generalisation is also somewhat true of the relationship between the Catholic Church and Australian society when my parents were young. Who you socialised with, how you socialised, who you married, what schools you went to, what schools you sent your children to, who you voted for, and who you

worked for was influenced by the Church. This however, is not the reality of the Catholic Church in Australia today. While the Church still informs adherent's lives, it is not to the same extent as I noted earlier. When we remove these relationships of influence, which is often the reality for these young people, perhaps we *are* left with a static building and passive experience. I know that you see the Church differently because by virtue of you being present today you are making a statement that you are the Church, your relationships with and in the Church matter and you are invested in its future. But think of the perspective of a young person looking in.

Young people are comfortable with their Catholic education, with holding leadership positions within these Catholic communities, with service opportunities, prayer and ritual, and even retreats. However, these experiences and encounters with Christ, are all facilitated by a community they trust, they feel a part of, and are committed to. Their commitment in contributing to these faith communities is a result of the community itself investing in these young people. The Church too, can be a community for young people that is grounded in this active and dynamic relationship, if we look beyond how we conceptualise what the Church means.

Andrew was speaking a moment ago about clericalism in the Church at present. While this is one cultural lens to consider, I think we need to acknowledge another shaping the Church in Australia as we speak. It is a culture of listening that has been born out of the preparations for the Plenary Council next year. Last night, some of you rightly questioned the Church's authenticity in this process. I acknowledge that despite the Church's efforts, at the end of the day it is those who are ordained that make the final decision, but I want to note that our young people are noticing this cultural shift. The Church in some dioceses actively sought out opportunities to listen to young people. Bishop Mark Edwards visited my school to speak with our school leaders. He listened to what matters the most to them: climate change, women in the Church, being active in service, and in general being disillusioned by leadership in society and the Church who purport to be authentic and true to their values and beliefs, but in reality failed to meet the mark. This was a vastly different experience to my own growing up where we were warned about being a 'cafeteria Catholic'. We either believed it all, or we didn't, which resulted in many young people of my generation simply giving up their faith, as it no longer provided the answers or guidance that they were

seeking. Pope Francis acknowledged this in *Christus Vivit* when saying, “A Church always on the defensive, which loses her humility and stops listening to others, which leaves no room for questions, loses her youth and turns into a museum.”¹ Even though the Church is starting to listen to the needs of young people, young people today still fear that if they do not fit the catechetical mould of the Catholic Church that they are not welcome. I think this perspective of Church needs to change and is changing.

As I noted earlier, the Church is community, it is service, relationships and can be a source of meaning for those who embrace it. This is not new, but for too long the Church itself has held onto structures and ritual to define itself. We, as the Church are more than this and need to share our experience of the Church with young people, so that they feel as though there is a place for them in the Church.

It is *us* who should find a ‘place’ for young people

When considering the word *place*, I was reminded of John’s Gospel: a rich narrative known for its poetic nature, high Christology and amongst other things, the often quoted passage from Chapter 14:2-3:

“In my Father’s house there are many dwelling *places*. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to *prepare* a *place* for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where *I am*, there *you may be* also.”

This hopeful passage offers us mere mortals a glimpse of what we may experience in the next life, eternal life. Jesus promises a permanent and life-giving dwelling place with himself and the Father. It also offers us a new perspective in actively addressing the topic ‘young people *finding* a *place* in the Church’.

In this passage, Jesus is active in preparing a *place* for us. Is it fair to ask young people to *find* their own place in our Church? Or should we, like Jesus, be active in preparing a place for young people? To do this, I believe we need to continue to listen to young people, their needs and their concerns. Last night, Michael spoke about his work with young people in his Sydney parish. He spoke about overseas immersion, service, conversation, and companionship. Facilitating

¹ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Apostolic Exhortation (25 March 2019).

opportunities like these are all crucial in preparing and nourishing a place for young people in our Church. It requires commitment and action from the Church. Catholic secondary schools under the guidance of religious orders are often best placed and resourced to facilitate these opportunities that Michael spoke of. The formation of young people then from secondary school into young adulthood would be continuous and grounded in the relationships of trust and commitment that I spoke of earlier. The Jesuit run Cardoner Project in Sydney is one model, and similar to what Michael spoke of, that can facilitate this process. A second model being rolled out next year in the Melbourne Archdiocese is the Catholic Schools Youth Ministry Program that employs young people to assist heads of faith formation and service in implementing their service opportunities and retreats. I believe this model can be effective if those assistant positions are filled by young people who once attended the school building their relationship with the Church and being living witnesses to others in the community.

A second insight that we can gain from this passage in John's Gospel is found in verse 3:

“if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where *I am*, there *you may be* also.”

The place that Jesus prepares for us is *with* Jesus: our place exists in relation to Jesus and so should the place that we prepare for young people in our Church. Young people are attracted to the radical message of Jesus because they share similar values and beliefs to those articulated in the Gospels. In this way, young people are like a canner in coalmine, they are the first to identify any inauthentic behaviour, any injustice, a lack of fairness or equality or inconsistencies with teachings, for example considering same-sex marriage as a social justice issue that should be about equality, love and human dignity. This is why they embrace service opportunities, immersions, giving back to the communities they are a part of and allowing their faith to be developed through a strong lens of service. If this is how they encounter Jesus, this is the place we must prepare for them in our Church.

The crux of Jesus' ministry was about actively seeking new relationships with people who were not socially or culturally accepted as having a voice. Jesus touched lepers, healed the down and out of society and interacted with women.

Jesus was counter-cultural and was motivated by his desire to enable people to participate in society, in the Kingdom of God and ultimately eternal life. The school that I work at is a Jesuit partnership school, meaning that we have adopted Ignatian Spirituality and Jesuit educational values. Ignatius of Loyola was bold in declaring that God was not confined to physical churches, monasteries or ordained men, but in all things including relationships, as Jesus exemplified. Forming and nourishing relationships constitutes active participation in the Church. It contradicts young people's prior experience of a passive dogmatic environment that makes decisions in secrecy and does not involve the community. As a teacher, I am aware of the important role of student voice in developing a sense of ownership in anything students commitment themselves to. Having your voice heard is crucial in all facets of life and indeed the life of the Church. We must listen to the voice of young people who want to be active in forming relationships with the vulnerable and with like-minded people. We need to acknowledge their gifts, talents and skills that they have to offer and provide opportunities where they can lead by example and be living witnesses to other young people. As Bishop Mark Edwards acknowledged, we need to "accompany the young in this new place and to lead them to and to support them to find places where they can encounter Jesus."²

We believe that by our very nature of being made in the image and likeness of God, we too are relational in nature. Being relational is central to being human, and living in communion with others is central to our understanding of Church. The Church cannot be a place where young people struggle to engage in relationships. As a "living tradition,"³ we demand that our Church respond to the needs of those it engages with. Therefore, finding a place in the Church for young people should not be limited to finding a place in a pew, rather it should be about finding a place out in the world in the midst of the complexities and realities of life. Because a place in the Church for young people is about discipleship, being relational and being living witnesses to the simple, yet powerful and counter-cultural message of Jesus Christ.

² Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, "Youth Synod: Intervention by Bishop Mark Edwards OMI," last modified 6 October 2018, <https://mediablog.catholic.org.au/youth-synod-intervention-bishop-mark-edwards-omi/>.

³ Pope Francis, "Address of his Holiness Pope Francis, Naples, 21 June 2019," http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/june/documents/papa-francesco_20190621_teologia-napoli.html.