

Growing Young in Christ:

A SPIRITUAL LETTER

TO CHRIST'S FAITHFUL OF BROKEN BAY
IN THE YEAR OF YOUTH 2018 AND
TOWARDS THE PLENARY COUNCIL 2020
FROM **MOST REV PETER A COMENSOLI**

PENTECOST 2018

*But those who wait for the Lord
shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.*

(Isaiah 40:31)



Dear friends in Christ,

In this Year of Youth, and as we begin our Diocesan journey towards the National Assembly of the Church in Australia – the Plenary Council of 2020, I want to reflect with you on what it means for us to be young in Christ. May this question direct our hearts and minds in the year ahead....

Jesus Christ – The One who is Young

To walk into the Sistine Chapel in Rome is to walk into the living story of the Catholic Church. Yet, for many people today it is nothing more than a glorified art gallery, telling an old story of an old institution. But what if we were to look to the walls of the Chapel with an eye willing to see beyond their artistic merit? What might we see? Perhaps there is a story to tell which is not old but young.

Every panel in the Sistine Chapel leads the eye onwards to the vast back wall upon which is Michelangelo's masterpiece, the Last Judgement. There, the future of our humanity – our eternal re-creation – is told in enormous figures and dramatic scenes. At its centre stands the pinnacle of our humanity, Jesus Christ. He is gigantic in proportions and majestic in presence. Gone is the gaunt, wounded body of the Crucified Lord. Before us now stands the risen Christ in all his glory, strong and beautiful to behold. And he is young!

We tend to imagine God to be elderly. This has contributed to a pervading sense of a Church that is worn down, old and stuffy. However, these views of God and his Church, Christ's Body, are mistaken. Jesus Christ is anything but old: he is the New Adam (1Cor 15:45); the Bridegroom running to meet his Bride (Mt 9:15); the Alpha and Omega (Rev 21:6); the eternally young I AM (Jn 8:58). Christ is young.

Time and again, Jesus points to his own eternal vitality as the sign of God's renewed presence among us. He offers new wine to the wedding couple (Jn 2:1); he gives living water to

the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:7); he feeds the multitude with the Bread of Life (Jn 6:35); and he stands among his friends offering them his peace (Jn 20:20). Through these great 'signs' we can be sure that Jesus Christ is the fullness of life, given for us. We Christians are disciples of a young Christ.

Holiness – Being Young in Christ

The history of our salvation is full of stories of the young saying 'yes' to God. Think of the young Samuel – "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening" (1 Sam 3:10), or the young David – "The Lord looks on the heart" (1 Sam 16:7), or the young Ruth – "Wherever you go, I will go" (Ruth 1:16). In each story it is the open heart of these young people – their willing and generous 'yes' – that moves the heart of God. None of them was perfect; yet each of them was receptive to the Lord's plan for them.

No other young person's 'yes' to God can be more highly regarded than that of the young woman from Nazareth, Mary. Mary's 'yes' to the news from the Angel set her on a path in life of complete openness to the Lord. When she found words to describe her heart in God, they were full of joy: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour." (Lk :46-47)

Mary's 'yes' to God stands above and beyond any 'yes' we might hesitantly make to the Lord, for she responded to God with a heart full of grace. Yet, our hearts are no different from hers to the extent that we too, like her, are God's beloved, lowly servants. Shining with baptismal grace, we have received the same fullness of grace as Mary. Therefore, the youthful 'yes' of Mary may equally be ours to declare.

Our Youthful 'Yes' – a Holy Complexion

It has always been the young in grace who have been the most open to saying 'yes' to God. Trust in the Lord is the greatest witness to a youthful heart beating to the rhythm of grace in the life of the Church. The young in Spirit are true

guides to discipleship in the Lord. The saints are witnesses to the youthfulness of Christ because their lives glowed with holiness. They did not aim to create for themselves a flawlessly manicured life. Instead, they worked to live their lives in a way that could show the world graced faces of faith, hope and love. The signs of a youthful discipleship in the Lord are not too hard to identify. Just as blood shows up in the colouring of our skin, so grace shows up in the colouring of our lives. We need only look to the complexion of our own lives to see God's presence. How does my life look to someone else? Is there a sense of trustfulness evident in my presence, along with hope? Does my friendship with Jesus show in what I say and do? Where does grace shine out in my life? Does my face shine with Christ?

Living in the World

Holiness is trusting that God has already created us beautifully in his image, and by the grace of Baptism has re-created us in the image of his Son, Jesus. Yet, how can we live in a way in which a holy complexion might shine, when society and culture combine to create false images of our humanity? A quote attributed to Pope Benedict XVI might help us to understand the nature of this call to youthful holiness, this living with a graced complexion: *"The world offers you comfort. But you were not made for comfort. You were made for greatness."*

The way of the world will inevitably clog our hearts with an accumulation of cares, leaving us old and worn out. Whereas the way of God is built to expand our hearts with the flow of grace, invigorating our lives and renewing our spirits. Those who choose to live God's way are the ones who desire a better life, who hope for a better future, and who work for a better now. Our years of age are not decisive in this respect. A beautiful face is possible at any age. The gracefully young are the ones who have embraced a Gospel boldness in life, and who leave a trace of God's grace for others to follow.

The Church: Young in (the) Body and (the) Spirit

If Christ Jesus is young; and if we, Christ's disciples, can be young; then the Body of Christ, the Church, is called to be young. This is a truth we urgently need to hear today. It is a truth that offers us a sure path to real life. As the Body of Christ, the Church is living, organic and creative: *"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."* (1Cor 12:12, 27) We, the Church, are an organic body in Christ, and not an institution that is remade at our will. We are a creative body in Christ, and are not a collection of curiosities in a museum. We are the living body of Christ, and not merely an NGO doing good works.

The first disciples of Jesus discovered the beauty of the Church in an upper room where they had gathered fearful, confused and despondent, to await a sign from God. That sign

was the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In that extraordinary moment, which gave birth to the Church, the disciples were transformed (Acts 2:1-13). From the beginning the Church was alive and energetic. The question is: would this be the description we would give to the Church in Australia today? We want to find hope, but struggle to see it before us. We call for reform, but do not seek conversion. We desire change, so long as others do the changing. Are these not the fears and wounds that are holding us back in our upper rooms? Are they not what make us – and our life in the Church – old and tired, angry or indifferent?

Discovering a New Pentecost

So, into our stagnant pools of dispondency, let a pebble of encouragement be dropped to stir us up! We need the young to draw us back into Christ's Body, the Church. Young people today live in a world difficult to understand. Ask them for little and they will give nothing; ask for much and they will give everything. Young people look for, and expect, a closeness between the ideal and the reality of life in the Church. They hope for, and demand, witnesses of holiness in whom they can place their trust, in a culture where little is trustworthy. Young people need a creed to believe in, and a compass by which they can be guided, in order to channel their abundant energies for Christ. They need us to light the path ahead.

The grace of Baptism is the pebble that can continue to ripple through our lives, stirring us up and back to Pentecost. This is not to dismiss the reality of our fallen ways. Instead, it is to see ourselves as wounded healers – and forgiven forgivers – so as to let the fire of evangelical energy be rekindled in us. A new Pentecost is there to be discovered so that we might find our way back to our youthfulness in Christ.

A New Song in an Ancient Land

Ours is an ancient land, into which the song-line of the Christian life is weaving into the song-lines of those who have travelled this earth long before us. It tells a shared story of the abiding presence of the Creator who now sings the song of the Redeemer. When Pope St John Paul II first came to Australia in 1986, he made his way to its centre, and spoke the name of Christ into the heart of our country. In this Year of Youth, and as we journey together towards the Plenary Council of 2020, may his words – spoken to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders of this Great South Land – find an echo in us today:

*You are like a tree standing in the middle of a bush-fire
sweeping through the timber.
The leaves are scorched and the tough bark is scarred and burned;
but inside the tree the sap is still flowing,
and under the ground the roots are still strong.
Like that tree you have endured the flames,
and you still have the power to be reborn.
The time for this rebirth is now!*