

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

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PENTECOST 20 MAY 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 story of the Catholic Church. It is where, after the death of a Pope, the Cardinals gather to elect the next Successor of St Peter. It is also where the greatest-ever series of Renaissance murals were painted by Michelangelo and his contemporaries, covering the entirety of its walls and ceiling. Entering into this moderate-sized chapel for the first time can trigger powerful emotions.

Sadly, for many people today the Sistine Chapel is nothing more than a gloriously appointed art gallery, curated to tell the story of an old institution, full of old structures, and touting an old story to indifferent ears. Yes, the Catholic Church has a past worthy of a documentary or two on the 'History Channel', but for many people today it does not have much of a future and is little more than a museum of the Christian story.

Yet, the walls of the Sistine Chapel – when looked upon with an eye willing to see beyond their artistic merit – have a story to tell which is not old but young, and it is this young story that can open us to our own future.

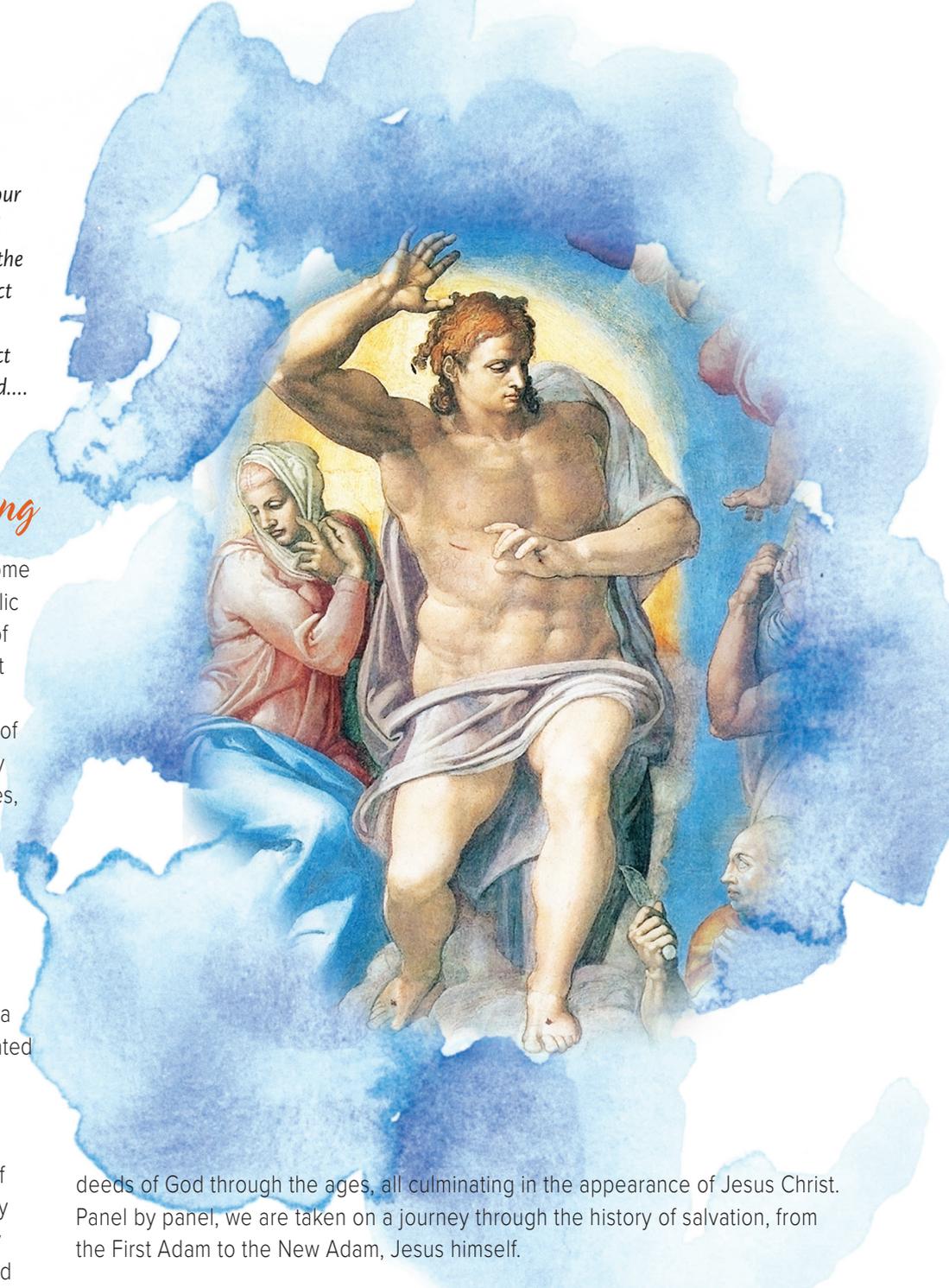
The story begins with the outstretched finger of a loving God creating our humanity. It goes on to capture in pigment the fall of our first parents, the call of our faith forebears, the mighty

deeds of God through the ages, all culminating in the appearance of Jesus Christ. Panel by panel, we are taken on a journey through the history of salvation, from the First Adam to the New Adam, Jesus himself.

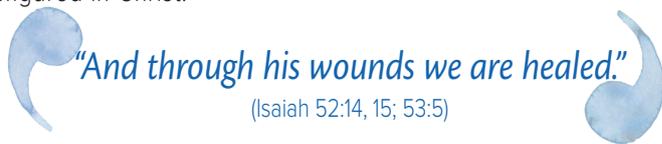
However, the story does not end there. Every panel in the Sistine Chapel leads the eye onwards, to the vast back wall upon which Michelangelo created his masterpiece, the Last Judgement. There, the future of our humanity – our eternal re-creation – is told in enormous figures and dramatic scenes. The story of heaven and hell is detailed for us: angels and demons; the Communion of Saints; and the damnation of souls. It is humanity's future story.

At the very centre of this apocalyptic drama stands the pinnacle of our humanity, Jesus Christ. He is gigantic in proportions and majestic in presence. He is muscular and healthy, with the physique of a weight lifter. He is naked. He is without a beard but has a full head of curly hair. Gone is the gaunt, wounded body of the Crucified Lord. Now the Lamb of God stands before all creation as the Lion of Judah. Here is the risen Christ in all his glory, strong and beautiful to behold.

And he is young!



Young, not in years, but in vitality. Our Saviour and Judge is young because he is alive. He exudes life, drawing all other lives into his. While the wounded body of Christ had lost all appearance of humanity, the glorious body of Christ is that of a young and strong man: "As the crowds were appalled on seeing him... so will the crowds be astonished at him." So then, our future bodies can be transfigured in Christ:



"And through his wounds we are healed."

(Isaiah 52:14, 15; 53:5)

As he stood before the restored frescoes in 1994, Pope St John Paul II captured beautifully the meaning of this young and glorious Christ.

"It is precisely this eternal Son to whom the Father has entrusted the cause of human redemption, who speaks to us in the dramatic setting of the Last Judgement. We are in front of an extraordinary Christ... More especially we stand before the glory of Christ's humanity. In fact, he will return in his humanity to judge the living and the dead, penetrating the depths of the human conscience and revealing the power of his redemption."¹

And he is young!

Strikingly, many people are surprised on first seeing Michelangelo's Christ, and many continue to be perplexed by it. Why is the Redeemer of humanity depicted so young? Surely, the Lord should be more properly portrayed as the Ancient of Days, or reflect the Wisdom of the Ages? Surely, the Son of God is an Elder Son of an Everlasting Father?

Sadly, this is an all-too-common view among Christian believers. Somehow, we have formed a habit of imagining God to be elderly in appearance and feel. Religious art has had a major influence in this regard, as has some popular catechesis. The very age of the Church itself has brought to Christianity a certain 'stuffiness', and a misunderstanding of Tradition. This has contributed to a pervading sense of a Church that is worn down. And of course, there is the premature ageing we inflict upon ourselves by sinning, which makes us world-weary and spiritually old.

However, these views of God and his Church, Christ's Body, are mistaken and quite unbiblical. The biblical image of Jesus is anything but of someone old and worn-out from the burden of carrying the sinful wounds of humanity. Christ is the New Adam (1Cor 15:45); he is the Bridegroom running to meet his Bride (Mt 9:15); he is the Alpha and Omega (Rev 21:6); he is the First Born from the dead (Col 1:18); he is the eternally young I AM (Jn 8:58). In this Christ, all things – including us – are made new (Rev 21:5). When St Paul insisted that we proclaim a crucified Christ (1Cor 1:23) he was not wanting us to dwell in his death, but to see our new life in the Spirit of him who is the Resurrection and the Life (Jn 11:25).

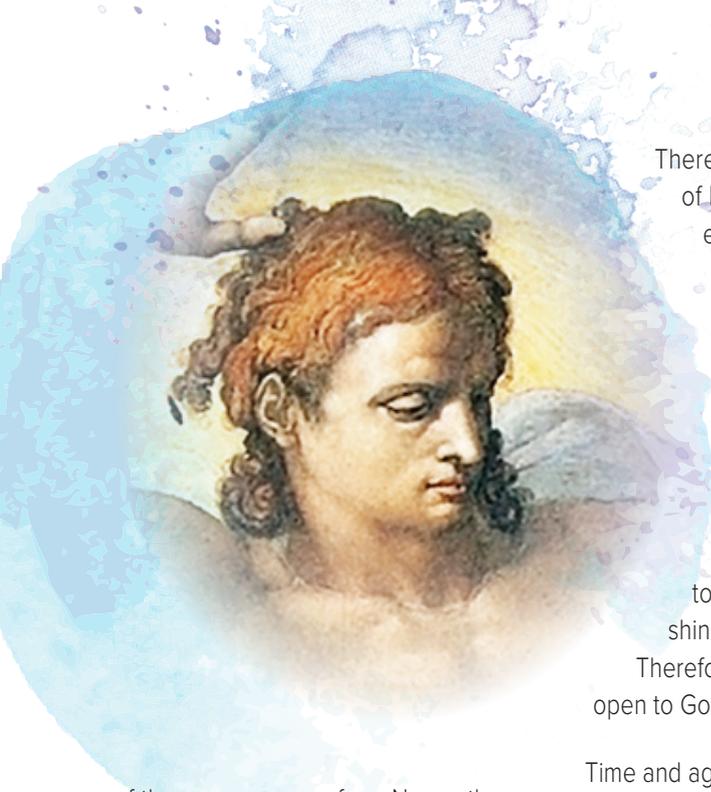
Biblically speaking, we can truly say that a Christian is someone who belongs to the young Christ: "through Him, and with Him, and in Him." The old Nicodemus learnt of this Good News when he came to Jesus in the night and was told of his need to be born again (Jn 3:1-21). Jesus revealed to Nicodemus that he is the source of all life, that he is Life itself. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Time and again, Jesus points to his own vitality – his eternally living self – as the sign of God's renewed presence among us. What he says to Nicodemus, he does in deeds: as he offers new wine to the wedding couple (Jn 2:1); as he gives living water to the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:7); as he feeds the multitude with the Bread of Life (Jn 6:35); as he opens the eyes of the blind man (Jn 9:1); as he raises Lazarus (Jn 11:1); as blood and water flows from his pierced side (Jn 19:34); and as he stands among his friends and offers them his peace (Jn 20:20). Through these great 'signs' of Christ's life, we can be sure that the image of Christ on the wall of the Sistine Chapel captures in art something of the fullness of his life, given for us. Our share in Christ's life comes by being grafted onto his living and fruitful Vine (Jn 15:5), and we are made young through our 'yes' to the life-giving youthfulness of Christ.

Holiness – Being Young in Christ

The history of salvation is full of stories in which it was the young who said 'yes' to God. We 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), or the young Esther – "I will go to the king" (Esther 4:16). In each story it is the open heart of these young people – their willing and generous 'yes' – that moves the heart of God. They are remembered as friends of the Lord, and bearers of Good News for others to follow. None of them was perfect, as their individual stories reveal; yet each of them was receptive to the Lord's ways and willing to respond generously. Their youthful spirits recognised and rejoiced in the Spirit of the Lord.

No other young person's 'yes' to God can be spoken of more highly than that



Therefore, we can truly say that the Mother of God, who was the First Disciple of her Son, became the Mother of the Church. As the recent decree establishing the Memorial of Mary, Mother of the Church puts it:

“Mary is the mother of the members of Christ, because with charity she cooperated in the rebirth of the faithful into the Church.”²

Our Youthful Yes’

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. Our re-created humanity, shining with baptismal grace, received the same fullness of grace as Mary.

Therefore, the youthful ‘yes’ of Mary may equally be ours to declare, if we are but open to God’s calling.

of the young woman from Nazareth, Mary. Mary’s ‘yes’ to the news from the Angel set her path in life as one of openness to the calling of the Lord. When she found words to describe her openness to God, they were full of joy:

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.” (Lk 1:46-47)

Mary’s enduring youthfulness in grace marks out for us the enduring youthfulness of the Church.

Where Mary has walked with her Son, so we may follow with her. She had always been with him. She will be with him – and us – at the end. Michelangelo, in another of his great works, the Pietà, was criticised for capturing Mary, holding her dead Son, as such a young woman. But he was insistent that the only honest way to portray her, who was full of grace, could only be as a young woman.

Rightfully so, Mary is God’s Mother but she is also the First Disciple of her Son. As a true disciple, Mary was always to be found where her Son would be: in his conception; at his birth; during his mission; while he died. And she was present when He gave us his Mystical Body, the Church, at Pentecost.

Time and again, it has been the young in grace who have been the most open to saying ‘yes’ to God. And time after time, it is their trust in the Lord that has been the greatest witness to the youthful heart that beats to the rhythm of grace in the life of the Church. The young in Spirit are true guides to discipleship in the Lord. They are the best of us in holiness, and our sure sign of hope. But what might we learn from them about how we may share in this hope to be young (again!) in grace, of which we are all in need?

From our young biblical witnesses, through the countless saints of our Church down through the ages – including our own young saintly women Mary of the Cross MacKillop and Eileen O’Connor – the signs of youthful discipleship in the Lord are not too hard to identify in hindsight. As St James put it:

“Show me your faith without works, and I by my works will show you my faith.” (Jm 2:18)

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. How does my life look to someone else? Is there a sense of trustfulness evident in my presence, along with hope? Are there signs of affection in me for what is good and true and beautiful? Does my friendship with Jesus show in what I say and do? Where does grace shine out in my life?

A Holy Complexion

We might say that the lives of the saints are witnesses to the youthfulness of Christ because their complexion glowed with holiness. They did not aim to create for themselves a flawlessly manicured life, perfectly artificial. Instead, they worked to live their lives in a way that could show the world graced faces of faith, hope and love. As Pope Francis puts it:

“Far from being timid, morose, acerbic or melancholy, or putting on a dreary face, the saints are joyful and full of good humour. Though completely realistic, they radiate a positive and hopeful spirit. The Christian life is ‘joy in the Holy Spirit’ (Rom 14:17), for the necessary result of the love of charity is joy.”³

St Paul gave us a handy description of what a graced face looks like, when he identified for us the fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Gal 5:22,23) The extent to which the fruits of the Holy Spirit are evident in someone's life is the extent to which grace is flowing through them.

For sure, we may ask how it is possible to live in a world where a holy complexion might shine, especially when malign influences in society and culture will always combine to create fashionably false images of our humanity. But deep down we basically know the answer. What holiness entails is a trust in God that he 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. 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.”***⁴

Pope Benedict is not saying that we are made to be rich, famous and powerful in a worldly city, as the word ‘greatness’ is often understood. Instead, he is pointing to the great destiny of being invited to the fullness of life in and with God. This greatness is an invitation to come into God's City of Grace, and to find our dwelling place there. Even if we might struggle to negotiate our way around this City or become indifferent to the vistas offered along its streets and in its suburbs, simply dwelling there is more valuable than getting on the latest train heading for artificial comfort.

Living in the World

The world's metropolis or the City of God? By which do we wish to live? The first will inevitably clog our hearts with an accumulation of cares, leaving us old and worn out. Whereas the other is built to expand our hearts with the flow of grace, invigorating our lives and renewing our spirits. Those who choose to live in God's city are the ones who desire a better life, hope for a better future, and work for a better now. “Thy kingdom [city!] come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.” Our years of age are not decisive in this respect; simply being young in years is not what makes someone young in grace. A beautiful face is possible at any age. The young in Christ are not the perfect specimens of youthful humanity that are here today and gone tomorrow. Rather, the gracefully young are the ones – of any age – who have embraced a Gospel boldness as their path in life, and who leave the mark of God's grace on the world's metropolis.

So: ***“Do not be afraid of holiness. It will take away none of your energy, vitality or joy. On the contrary, you will become what the Father had in mind when he created you, and you will be faithful to your deepest self... Do not be afraid to set your sights higher, to allow yourself to be loved and liberated by God. Do not be afraid to let yourself be guided by the Holy Spirit. Holiness does not make you less human, since it is an encounter between your weakness and the power of God's grace.”***⁵

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 truth concerning the Church, perhaps more than any other, is the one we most urgently need to hear today, because it is a truth that offers us a sure path to real life.

It is St Paul who bequeathed to the Church her image as the Body of Christ: living, organic, 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 can be made and remade at our will. We, the Church, are a creative body in Christ, and are not a collection of curiosities in a museum. We, the Church, are the living body of Christ, and not merely an NGO doing good works.

My life in Christ, therefore, is a common life I share with you in His Body; and we have seen that His Body is gloriously and eternally young. Therefore, we – together – are truly the Church Christ wants us to be, when we – together – are truly young in Him. It is a beautiful thing to discover that we do not stand alone, or isolated, or separated from each other when we stand as the Church, and that we can find the dignity of our lives by being alive in His Body.

Almost two thousand years ago, the disciples of Jesus discovered the beauty of the Church in an upper room where they had gathered fearful, confused, angry and despondent. They were there awaiting a sign from God. That sign was the gift of the Holy Spirit. And in that extraordinary moment, which gave birth to the Church, the disciples were transformed (Acts 2:1-13). They felt impelled to speak to all of their encounter with the Risen Jesus, their friend and Lord. Pentecost was a fire that brought Gospel energy and a sense of purpose to the disciples, driving out their fears and healing their wounds.

This was the Church at her beginning: alive, energetic, young. The question is, though, would this be the description we would give to the Church in Australia today? What adjectives would we use? We each carry wounds that makes the journey of faith difficult. We have experienced hurts that can fester into bitterness. We want to find hope, but struggle to see it before us. We call for reform, but do not seek conversion. We desire a changed reality, 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? Are these the adjectives we want?

Discovering a New Pentecost



So, into this stagnant pool of discontent, 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, truly present for them. "As Christians you stand in this world knowing that God has a human face – Jesus Christ: the 'way' who satisfies all human yearning, and the 'life' to which we are called to bear witness, walking always in his light." ⁶

Young people today live in a world sometimes difficult for us 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.

It was on the day of our Baptism that God first drew each of us into his purifying fire, and into the Church. We were adopted as sons or daughters of the Father. We were grafted onto the living vine of Christ. We were made a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. At our Baptism we became a new creation, and members of Christ's Body. We have been given the baton of Christ's light to illumine the way ahead. Therefore, "We need to think of ourselves as an army of the forgiven. All of us have been looked upon with divine compassion... Seeing and acting with mercy: that is holiness." ⁷

As the pebble that continues to ripple through our lives, the grace of Baptism can still stir us up and back to Pentecost. This is not to dismiss the reality of our fallen ways, or not to admit where we have wounded the living Body of Christ. 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.

Therefore: ***"Let us ask the Lord for the grace not to hesitate when the Spirit calls us to take a step forward. Let us ask for the apostolic courage to share the Gospel with others and to stop trying to make our Christian life a museum of memories. In every situation, may the Holy Spirit cause us to contemplate history in the light of the risen Jesus. In this way, the Church will not stand still, but constantly welcome the Lord's surprises."*** ⁸

Michelangelo's young Christ painted onto the back wall of the Sistine Chapel is surrounded by that "great cloud of witnesses" we call the Communion of Saints, those who have gone before us marked with the sign of the faith. There are all sorts of saints represented: apostles, martyrs, prophets, virgins, religious and laity; and there are all sorts of faces among them: young and old, women and men. But their bodies have a similarity: strength, beauty, vitality, and especially youthfulness. And at the centre, immediately next to her Son, is our Blessed Mother Mary. Where Christ has gone, the saints have followed. Now it is our turn.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

(Heb 12:1-2)

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, he made his way to its centre, and spoke the name of Christ into the heart of our country. In his address 32 years ago, the saintly Pope had these words to say to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders of the Great South Land. In this Year of Youth of 2018, and at the beginning of our shared journey to the Plenary Council of 2020, may they find a new sounding 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!***⁹



Most Rev Peter A Comensoli



¹ John Paul II, Homily, Celebration of the unveiling of the restorations of Michelangelo's frescos in the Sistine Chapel, 8 April 1994.

² Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Decree on the Celebration of the Blessed Virgin Mary Mother of the Church in the General Roman Calendar, 11 February 2018.

³ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 19 March 2018: §122.

⁴ The closest reference to this attribution is: "Christ did not promise an easy life. Those who desire comforts have dialled the wrong number. Rather, he shows us the way to great things, the good, towards an authentic human life." Pope Benedict XVI, Address to German Pilgrims, 25 April 2005.

⁵ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 19 March 2018: §32, 34.

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the youth of the world at WYD2008, Barangaroo, Sydney Harbour, Thursday, 17 July 2008

⁷ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 19 March 2018: §82.

⁸ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 19 March 2018: §122.

⁹ Pope John Paul II, Address to the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, Alice Springs, 29 November 1986.

FOR REFLECTION

As we move through the Year of Youth, we are invited to reconnect with a youthfulness of mind and spirit, and with the energy, creativity and vivacity that youth brings. These are the same qualities that we seek to bring to the Plenary Council 2020 in our Australian Church so as to be open to whatever newness the Spirit is calling us to.

A Youthful Christ

The cornerstone of our Christian faith is that Christ is alive in glory, and at the centre of our past, present and future. There are beautiful biblical images of Christ as young: A new Adam; a bridegroom; the Alpha; the firstborn of the dead; the eternally young I AM. Furthermore, Jesus showed us a renewed presence of God through actions such as feeding, healing and the raising to life. We have a share in this fullness of life that Jesus brings.

- What image do I have of Christ present to me today? Is he young?
- How do the images above speak of youth and newness? Which image speaks to you most vividly of a youthful Christ? Why?
- In what ways do you feel 'spiritually young' or 'spiritually old'?
- Where do you long to see God's renewed presence today?

Our 'Yes'

Just like Mary, our 'yes' to God can make all the difference in our lives. Our openness to God and our 'yes' to whatever we discern God is calling us to is what allows us to cooperate with God's creativity and newness and keeps us spiritually young.

- Do I seek to discern what God is asking of me?
- Do I say 'yes' readily to God?
- What shape does my 'yes' to God take in my life?

A Holy Complexion

We can be holy because we have been created beautifully in the image of God; and we have been re-created in Baptism in the image of Christ. The way our lives are seen (through the way we live) can be termed the 'complexion of our lives'. The

complexion of a disciple of Christ glows with holiness and shines with the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

- Can I name someone who has a complexion of holiness?
- Which qualities of a 'holy complexion' do I recognise in myself?
- Which qualities should I try to cultivate further in my life so as to grow in holiness?

Living in the World

There is a real difference between the 'world's metropolis' with its enslavement and artificiality; and 'God's City of Grace' through which God's grace brings renewal and makes the Kingdom of God a reality, leading to fullness of life in God.

- Do you feel you live more in the 'world's metropolis' or in the 'City of God's Grace'?
- Do you have a sense of being 'young in grace' where God's grace can flow through you into the world in ever-new ways?

A Youthful Church

The Church is the organic, creative and living Body of Christ. If Christ's Body is indeed gloriously young, then the Church is also truly young. This is especially seen in the very early nascent Church at Pentecost, with the energetic and bold power of the Holy Spirit.

- Do you feel that you are a part of a unified Body that is journeying together?
- What adjectives would you use to describe the Church today?
- Where do you see signs of creativity, life, and energy in the Church today?
- In what areas is the boldness and energy of the Holy Spirit needed?
- As we journey towards Plenary Council 2020, where do you feel the Holy Spirit is calling us to be?
- Are we, as Church, open to a new future, to welcoming the Lord's surprises and discovering a new Pentecost?

If you would like to submit thoughts that may have been raised by this reflection please contact: plenarycouncil@bbcatholic.org.au



**CATHOLIC
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