

# THE YOUNG CHURCH

GOD'S GIFT IN YOUR CARE

A LETTER FROM THE BISHOPS OF IRELAND  
TO ALL CONCERNED WITH THE  
PASTORAL CARE OF YOUNG PEOPLE.



International Youth Year  
1985

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## The Call of the Future

In this the International Year of Youth, we, the Catholic Bishops of Ireland, address this letter to all of you in this country, and even beyond, who have a special interest in Youth Ministry. We address it, then, in a particular way, to priests and religious, teachers and catechists, parents and youth leaders.

We feel compelled to write it, partly because this is International Youth Year, but mostly in appreciation of your work, in gratitude for your dedication and in the fervent hope that you will find our reflections helpful and encouraging. We write it, too, in the full realisation that in more than one sense, there is strength in numbers. Such a high proportion of young people amongst our population enhances all our hopes that the Christian vision of life can be carried into the future, with corresponding vigour, by this new generation.

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## Different Horizons

Young people's experience of life is different in many ways from our own. Pope John Paul told us all at Knock that each generation is like a new continent to be won for Christ. That is an image we can take literally. It follows that helping young people to maturity of faith can mean for us as big a change of wavelength as going to Africa or Asia. And who at times is not afraid of such a journey? This letter is our plea to you who have care of youth to undertake that journey, to undertake that reaching out. The difference between the generations is never the whole story. Underlying that, there is so much common ground in our shared faith in Jesus Christ — to share that faith in a way that can make sense in our times is the special reason for this letter.

## Towards a New Listening

We do not want to fail young people and their searchings. Our greatest desire is to reach out to them as would Our Lord. Their youthful ways challenge us in our expressions of faith. Their hopes impel us to review our more settled visions of the Church. The way they look at life invites us to widen our religious horizons so as to include all the wounded world and to respond to it like Christ.

The young have little patience with narrow views or with anything that seems lacking in humanity. Just as there is a lot of goodness in their idealism so, too, there is a great deal of honesty in their criticism of Church life. We must recognise that.

Many of the new generation, thank God, have a strong commitment to Christ. A number of their friends and contemporaries, however, are unsure about religion. Indeed, some seem to have closed the book on faith and to have turned elsewhere. To *all* of them, including those who feel hostile to the Church, we wish to say and we urge you to say:

“We want to listen to you. We need that time of listening to appreciate your hungers and your hurts, your angers and hopes, your attitudes in many areas, including your experience of the Church in Ireland now.”

## **An Invitation to All**

In short, this letter is only a first step — an invitation to a new dialogue within the whole people of God. We want to know when young people cannot follow our vision or find it untrue in some way. We need the honesty of being challenged like that. We also need to know where young people share our hopes. We need the consolation of knowing that. Our deep desire is that this year would herald a new communication within the Church at all levels.

This dialogue can build on the firm foundations already laid in so many places by you. The Church in Ireland has always placed great emphasis on its presentation of the faith to young people and has given much attention to education at various levels. This is still a very rich tradition in our country and one that can continue to compliment the mission of families and parishes in the building up of a mature faith for the future. In more recent times, thanks to you, we have seen the emergence of many excellent initiatives in Youth Ministry. These range from sports groups and youth organisations to retreat centres and channels of social involvement. They have tried in imaginative ways to find the appropriate language for faith today. Many of you have faced the new situation with enterprise and courage. Already your efforts have borne much fruit.

## **The Realities We See**

What is this new situation? How can it be described? Even though it must be tentative and incomplete, we would like to offer an outline of how this 'youth-culture' can be understood pastorally. A noticeable characteristic of young people is their emphasis on experience. What carries most weight with them is not what they are told by 'authority' but what they believe they experience for themselves. As Pope Paul VI put it, people today are less impressed by what they are taught than by what they witness. This stress on experience underlies two other vital marks of the young generation as we understand it. The first is a search for friendship. The second is a sensitivity to issues of justice in the world.

## Relationships and Community

With regard to friendship: their surrounding world seems to highlight the special value of both personal relationships and the search for community. As a result they can feel dissatisfied with an impersonal society or with a Church that doesn't seem to offer a genuine community. In addition to that, they are offered all the excitements of a highly sophisticated world of entertainment but find out sooner or later that its moods and movements do not satisfy them and that deep hungers remain unmet: for friendship, for belonging, for meaning. The continuing but increasingly urgent challenge for the Church is to become the place where those needs can best be met, and indeed the place where we learn together to know the meaning, the belonging and the friendship revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

## A World Conscience

The other characteristic of young people today, which we can only applaud, is the expansion of conscience that makes them feel for the needs of the whole world. Many of them are genuinely concerned about the big issues facing humanity at the end of the twentieth century. They have a real sense of justice and often a deep generosity in wanting to heal the ills of our divided world. They have a passion for peace and a horror of war and they are angered and embittered by the scandal of so much spending on arms when so many people live in want. Indeed they are truly appalled by the threat of nuclear holocaust, which hangs like a nightmare over their generation, as our letter, *The Storm that Threatens*, sought to underline. They see unjust divisions in the world as a whole, but they see those divisions closer to home as well — as in Ireland, where the new wealth of the sixties has given way to the unequal opportunities of the eighties. They see their own future darkened by the shadow of unemployment and are forced to question the priorities of a society in which so many are made irrelevant or pushed aside. They are oftentimes alert to a selfishness even among their own contemporaries, whose main reality lies in the pursuit of individualistic goals and private ambitions and which creates a blindness to an Irish social situation where some are privileged and others are not.

These evils — and others — rightly disturb our young people. Sometimes, and understandably, they make them feel helpless before the future. They awaken a hunger to change the situation so that humanity might live with greater dignity and less fear. All this is part of a different horizon of conscience that we recognise today and one that is needed in the Church as a whole in Ireland. The sensitivity of the young to issues of injustice is in harmony with our pastoral letter of 1977, *The Work of Justice*, where we questioned whether ‘our concept of religion gives proper place to justice and charity as well as to Mass and the sacraments and prayer’. Their vision calls us in at least two directions: towards a more active Christian involvement in the struggle for justice and towards a more alert Christian critique of the dehumanising forces within our society.

## Weighing the New Values

In one sense this youthful scene challenges us to rethink our inherited Christianity. But the challenge is not one-way-traffic. We too must challenge young people to explain some of the assumptions and the possible deceptions in the culture that shapes them. We must help them to be more alert to the various forms of exploitation they can undergo, even at the hands of their peers. In trying to outline some major traits of their time, we have been aware of so much that is good and generous in this generation. As Christians, however, we must look at all these values in the light of the Scriptures. Our tradition tells us that there is something strangely wrong with humanity: what is good can become distorted. To be innocent of this is itself a real danger, especially for young people. (The attraction of some of the ‘cults’ in recent years is one painful example of this.)

In regard to personal experience, it is important to point out that while genuinely personal experience is immensely valuable, one’s judgements are bound to be limited if based on immediate experience alone. Remember history and the amount of human experience which has been accumulated in the Church. One form of truth, for instance, that does not fall within the realm of sense experience is the truth of faith. Young people need to be reminded of that. We need to say to them:

“Cherish the aliveness of your own experience but do not at the same time exclude a wider wisdom than your own. Remember history and how the Church has long been an expert in humanity. Remember especially that Jesus speaks to you not only about ‘things in the world’ but about ‘heavenly things’ too (*Jn 3:12*). St Paul describes Christians as foolish if they let themselves hope ‘for this life only’ (*1 Cor 15:19*). So trust your experience — yes. But do not forget that a Christian is called to something greater than we can experience here.”

Even in our espousal of the cause of justice there can be a certain ambiguity. Wanting to change the world can be rooted in anger rather than compassion. It can be tainted with arrogance rather than chastened with humility. As Jesus himself pointed out, we cannot be justifiably indignant about the splinter in another’s eye until we have first adverted to the log in our own. Values that are not sharpened by self-awareness or purified in the struggle with one’s own selfishness can easily be impaired by self-righteousness and can cut off all of us, including the young, from the deeper springs of life.

## The Real Church

Five years ago, in our letter, *Handing on the Faith in the Home*, we raised the question as to whether many Irish adults arrive at genuinely grown-up religion. “Are we going through our adult lives with ideas about religion more suitably for primary schoolboys and schoolgirls than for modern adults?” The same kind of questions need to be put both to those in the younger generation who remain solidly faithful to Catholicism and to those who have difficulties over faith or practice:

—“What do you mean by ‘the Church?’”

—“How deep is your understanding of Christian morality?”

—“What is your image of God?”

—“How well do you know Jesus Christ?”

People talk about the Church a good deal in Ireland but generally what they have in mind is a rather narrow understanding of it. They identify it with its merely institutional aspects. They reduce it to a business of bishops and priests. It is spoken of as ‘out there’ and seldom as involving the speakers themselves. When young people speak of ‘the Church’ they sometimes envisage it as a ‘thing’ older people are ‘into’, or as something set in its ways, boring in its worship, out-moded in its norms. This is a perception of the Church conditioned by some unfriendly criticism; we must listen to whatever truth



is in it, but we must remember that it is not the whole story. It is an impoverished version both of what the Church is and what it was meant to be.

We would like you to create the kind of atmosphere within the Church in which young people can find space to grow in faith. We all need to listen, as we stressed earlier, to the views of young people about the kind of Church that can meet their search for community, their need to make sense of life, their desire to find and follow Christ in this world now, their hunger to live generous lives that can bring hope to others.

If we listen together to those searchings, it will surely spell both change and new life. It will mean building on the excellent foundation of communities already within the Church. At no time in the history of Irish Catholicism has there been such a marvellous diversity of groups involving people of all ages in the deepening of their faith and in the service of others. These developments need further encouragement to meet the needs of the present and of the future.

## The True God of Christianity

When talking about 'Church' we suggested that young people can fall victim to inadequate perceptions of a deep reality. The same can be true of our understanding of God. What is God like? If we call ourselves Christian believers, are we sure that we have the full image of God shown to us in Jesus? If some describe themselves as 'unbelievers' could it not be that they are rejecting some impoverished picture of God? Quite often we find ourselves defending or attacking something that is not really the face of God as revealed to us in the Scriptures. The Jesus of the Gospels is *the* image of God for Christians. That is what the title 'Christian' means — someone who finds the fullest human presence of God in the person of Jesus Christ. This great reality will be the focus of our next section. But first we need to clear the ground, so to speak, by banishing some of the false images of God that lurk deep within all of us at times.

Some people carry around with them an image of God that is in fact superstitious. It is the image of the punishing puppet master who has to be humoured and pacified in case he might pull the wrong string. Others picture him as a distant, inaccessible authority figure who is totally out of tune with the friendship held out to us in Christ. A surprising number of people look on God as a kind of clock-maker — a God of explanation

for the universe but a God irrelevant to ordinary life. There are even those who only know him as a God of the gaps. He has no compelling existence until favours are needed or trouble strikes.

Again, we need to remind the young that none of these is the God of Christianity. Indeed, the only God worth believing in is the God who believed enough in people to die for us. The only God worth living for is the One who calls us to live with him, through dark faith in this life, and beyond death in face-to-face fullness. The only God worth searching for is the One who searched for us and who still struggles within us in order that we become more free to love. Perhaps it is all too easy to pick up false images and to get stuck with them. It is harder to listen more deeply for the One who stands at the door of each life and knocks, who wants to come in and be with us, who comes to expand the size of our tent and guide us to life more abundant. (*Rev 3:20; Is 54:2; Jn 10:10*)

## Finding Jesus Today

“My wish for each of you is that the paths of your youth may meet in Christ.” (*Apostolic Letter on Youth, Pope John Paul II, Palm Sunday 1985*)

As part of the preparation for this letter, we consulted various groups of young people. From them came a seemingly unanimous message which might be summed up like this:

“The world we live in is one of confusion and uncertainty. In the midst of changing values we look for meaning in our lives. But in this new environment a merely superficial faith will not easily survive. Too often faith has been reduced to a moral code, or to minimum church practice. Irish Catholicism needs to renew its cornerstone, which is personal commitment to Jesus Christ through the Church. This is the rock on which we must build. Who is Jesus for us today? And how can our young contemporaries find him? These are old questions made new by the urgent pressures of our time.”

We say a heartfelt YES to that cry of need and of hope. YES because the Church world-wide has been discovering the urgent call for evangelisation everywhere in recent years. YES because it rings true with our own experience of an Ireland in rapid

evolution. And YES because it is a task that must involve the young themselves as co-workers or partners with the official ministers of the Church in making the gospel alive for our time. But let us face those questions — about Jesus and how to find him now — and let us cite some of the answers that came to us from young people:

“Jesus is not just a nice message but a real person: not a superman but someone who experiences failure and yet who loved as nobody else in history. . . .”

“He identified himself with down and outs, prostitutes, marginalised. . . . He was rejected even by his home town. He was not accepted by the religious leaders. . . .”

“He loved his friends but was lonely on the road; he was not afraid of the desert that strengthened him for the Cross. . . . within himself he struggled. . . .”

“He alone can unlock our imprisoned potential for love — that’s what salvation means. . . .”

“Jesus was the human face of God. Now he lives within each person. . . .”

“We become aware of the presence of Jesus best through those who have been ‘captured’ by him and who live entirely for God and for others. . . .”

“At the place where it hurts, at the heart of our weakness, Jesus meets us with healing and hope. . . .”

“He becomes real whenever anyone responds to people as he did. . . .”

“Jesus is not the good character of a fairy-tale. He is God and Man. God has come and pitched his tent among humanity. More than we can dream, he can open our hearts to the cry of the world for healing and help; there we will find him. . . .”

## Through the Church

That is an inspiring litany. Where can it be realised fully except within the Church? Recall what we said earlier about the many poor images of the Church and the need to enrich them. The Church is the community of the friends of Jesus, those who follow his way, those who are guided by his spirit. Above all, it is *the* place where Jesus can be encountered in a rich diversity of ways. If, through you, this letter helps the young Catholics of Ireland to deepen their appreciation of Church as the place and means of encounter, then we will be very happy indeed.

Let us present six roads within the Church that lead to Christ — all of them beginning with S. *Quite* deliberately we do not elaborate on them. We simply set them down as aids to reflection and sharing in your ministry to young people. They are ancient gifts of the Church. She offers them gladly to all of us, as we search for a faith in Christ that will prove durable in today's world.

Apart from other rich elements of our Catholic tradition, we find within the Church these six graced roads to discovering Jesus as Lord:

— through the *solidarity* of belonging to a welcoming Church, because Christ is always found within the community of his friends;

— through the *service* of others, in lives of generosity towards those suffering from the evils of our world;

— through the *sacraments*, as special meeting-places with the Lord, moments that mark all the needs of a lifetime;

— through *Sunday* Mass, as the weekly communal celebration of our Resurrection with the Lord;

— through *scripture*, as our foundation of knowing the story of Jesus and the revelation of God;

— through *silence* as creating a space for prayer and for letting the Word of God change us.

There is much that could be said about each of these avenues to faith within the Church. Each of them is an essential part of our Church tradition. Each of them has been a marvellous source of strength for generations past on this island. It is our conviction that they can continue to serve the journey in faith of this generation too. But of course it is only realistic to face the fact that even these great roads of grace can become impoverished by routine. They need renewal. They need to be understood more deeply. They need to be experienced as moments of encounter with the Lord, and not just as external duties. We look to young people for their suggestions as to how best to renew these roads to Christ so as to meet the needs of today.

## The Road Forward

“So do not be passive; take up your responsibilities in all the fields open to you in our world.”

*(Apostolic Letter on Youth, Pope John Paul II, Palm Sunday 1985)*

We see a Church of community and of participation as *the way of faith* in the future. If this is the hope, how can it be incarnated in our real world *now*? How can we build together on the foundations of the past but in ways that are faithful to the present and the future? Earlier we mentioned the impact of change as creating a new faith-situation in Ireland and of our hope to be ready, with missionary imagination, for whatever is needed from the Church in the years ahead. Without wishing to deny the problem areas that worry anyone with pastoral responsibility, we are aware also of so much that is alive and hopeful in the present situation. We are deeply grateful, for instance, for the many young people who are willing to build up a new ministry of evangelisation for their own contemporaries. We are also thankful to God for the vocations to the priesthood and religious life that have come in recent years and we pray for a continued increase so that the mission of the Church can be continued both in Ireland and abroad.

If all this newness challenges us, it is a positive challenge, not just a situation of danger. This can be a most purifying moment in our history, inviting all generations to a new level and language of faith — less complacent, less preoccupied with the institutional, less in control of every situation. This time of history may humble us into a gentler faith of searching, of honest striving to be true to the vision of Christ in Ireland of 1985.

Out of this moment of challenge a renewed community of believers must come to birth — patiently but not too slowly. If it were too cautious it might fail the fields ripe for the harvest now. This moment will make particular calls on families to become the Church in miniature, places where Christ can be found especially in his values lived out with love; places where the voice of God can be heard against the clamour of today's world, calling young people to service in his vineyard. There can be no greater seed bed of faith for the future than the blessing of a happy family where God becomes gradually more real with the years. The ways of expressing faith may differ from generation to generation in order to do justice to new surroundings and the different questions and pressures. But it will be the same faith at its core — with its centre in the following of Christ and in meeting him through the life of the Church and through the calls of his world now.

## The New Continent

And so, at this moment in Irish history and in this special year of youth, we Bishops turn to the young people both for help and with a challenge. Through you we say to them:

“Help us to understand the new needs — for you have needs that we may not understand. Help us to view this new world of yours with hope. Help us to bring forth *together* from the treasure house of our tradition wisdom both old and new. (Mt 13:52)  
Help us to create the future by becoming active in your own parishes, and in your places of work or study. Help us to shape the community of Christians for tomorrow.”

What is the key challenge of our time? Surely it is the struggle to live true to humanity now and to Christ now. Our wounded world cries out in so many ways. Our dreams and our fears wrestle with one another. Left to one's own self, each of us can be tempted to withdraw from the crucial struggle. It is Jesus who calls us into community as friends and then gives us power to bring hope to the world. It is from him that the great challenges come, the challenges of the Gospel itself. We must help young people to face those challenges:

to face his question: “who do you say that I am?”  
to come and see what faith might be;  
to be open to accept forgiveness;  
to recognise him in the breaking of bread;  
to watch and pray to be saved from deceptions;  
to find and follow his way in the world of today;  
to let go of self and give oneself for others;  
to learn to love the ‘least’ of people, even our enemies;  
to receive his Spirit within the community;  
to become bearers of a living Gospel that can heal the world.

## The Task of the Church

To realise those Gospel hopes is the task of the Church in every age and place. How will that task be continued in the Ireland of the next decades? It will depend greatly on the imaginative communication of faith through the Church at local level, through the renewal of catechesis in schools, through the daily witness of parents and the support of believing families. All of you who are involved in youth ministry of any kind deserve our prayer and our encouragement in every way. The young themselves deserve our best efforts so that they can find their way to Christ. What has been written here will be fruitless if it does not lead to action and renewal that involves the young people themselves as the shapers of their own future and of the future Church.

## Conclusion

We would like to end this letter on a note of confidence and hope. Many of the things happening in the Church at the present time must be antidotes to pessimism. All over Ireland, for instance, there are thousands of young people whose love of Our Lord is strong and generous and who find purpose and challenge in the mission of the Church. There are many more on the periphery of the Church's life who would be equally committed if only they were motivated and involved. Although a great deal remains to be done, thanks to people like yourselves, the work of motivating and involving them has already begun. We must not falter now or be daunted by the task ahead of us. As we persevere together in faith it is no harm to remind ourselves that the survival of that faith and the further spread of the Gospel do not depend on our own unaided efforts. Our problems are human, our help divine. Pentecost, which so heartened the early apostles, is a permanent experience in the Church's life. The presence of the Holy Spirit as animator and helper will never be diminished or withdrawn. "The Spirit comes to help us in our weakness" says St Paul (*Romans 8:26*) in an echo of Christ's assurance that the coming of his Spirit would be an infusion of power (*Acts 1:8*). We put our faith in that power and in the presence of Christ amongst us. The Church has survived all sorts of crises in the past.

It will, with God's help, confront and surmount the crises of the future. When despondency threatens or the pace of change provokes us to occasional panic, we will recall Christ's reassuring rebuke to the anxious disciples:

“Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?”  
(*Matthew 8:26*)

## DISCUSSION POINTS

These extracts from the letter and related questions are aimed at helping parents, those concerned with the young, and young people themselves, reflect on the letter and its implications for them. For groups such as diocesan clergy, religious communities and community groups, schools and parishes, these issues may prompt them to consider how they allocate personnel and resources in the future.

### An Invitation to All

“*This letter is only a first step — an invitation to a new dialogue within the whole people of God.*”

- \* Where are we creating an atmosphere where young people can express themselves and communicate?
- \* How can we help this happen more often?

### The Realities We See

“*What is this new situation?*”

- \* What is influencing young people today?
- \* What are the main issues of world injustice that concern young people?
- \* What are the main issues of local injustice that concern young people?
- \* Evil is a reality in all of human life. How do we deal with the evil in our own lives?



## The Real Church

“People talk about the Church a good deal in Ireland but generally what they have in mind is a rather narrow understanding of it. They identify it with its merely institutional aspects. They reduce it to a business of bishops and priests. It is spoken of as ‘out there’ and seldom as involving the speakers themselves.”

- \* This is the way the Church is often presented nowadays. How do we react?
- \* “This is not the whole story.” Can we see evidence of this?

## The God of Christianity.

“The Gospel of the Gospel is THE image of God for Christians.”

- \* To what extent is our image of God influenced by Jesus Christ?
- \* How can we help young people appreciate that God loves them personally?

## The Road Forward.

“We see a Church of community and of participation as THE way of the faith in the future.”

- \* Where do young people experience the Church as a community of welcome and participation?
- \* Young people say there is no place to go except the pub. Discuss.
- \* How can we, the friends of Jesus, create new places of hope?
- \* Do we see our family as an opportunity and challenge to play our part in the Church of Christ?
- \* When we talk about the Church do we feel we are talking about ourselves?

“We are deeply grateful . . . for the many young people who are willing to build up a new ministry of evangelisation for their own contemporaries.”

- \* Where do young people feel they are co-workers and partners with adults in the work of Christ in the Church today?

“The young people should become the first apostles of the young, in direct contact with them, exercising the apostolate by themselves among themselves, taking account of their social environment.” (Apostolicam Actuositatem 12, of Evangelii Nuntiandi 72.)

- \* How can we develop this apostolate of young people?

## The Task of the Church

“All involved in Youth Ministry of any kind deserve our prayer and our encouragement in every way.”

“Training for the apostolate cannot consist of theoretical teaching alone, on that account there is need, right from the start to learn gradually to see all things in the light of faith, to judge and act always in its light, to improve and perfect oneself by working with others, and in this manner to enter actively into the service of the Church.”

(Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity Par 29.)

- \* Where are young people now receiving this formation to be apostles?
- \* What methods are available?
- \* How can we promote this?

**Participation: Questions for Young People**

- \* Where do I experience the Church as a living community revealing Jesus Christ to me?
- \* What opportunities exist for me to participate?
- \* What are the barriers within the person and without that make it difficult for young people to be partners in the Church?
- \* How can I take my part responsibly in the Christian community?