



Letter to students in Years 12 & 13 Catholic Colleges, Diocese of Palmerston North

Dear each of you

I am writing to you because I believe young people have so much to offer the world.

Sometimes they say to us that they feel religion is being “forced” on them; that they should be allowed to make their own decisions about right and wrong; that God must be cruel to allow so much suffering and injustice in the world; that people shouldn’t have to go to Mass on Sunday, and so on.

If these are the kind of questions that trouble you too, then you are very normal. They are the kind of questions you have to ask before you can come to the answers. So that’s okay.

The trouble with the answers is that they usually come much later than the questions. That can leave a time of confusion in between. The reason why the answers take longer is that they depend partly on experiences that you have not had yet. The good thing about this is that when the answers do come to you they really will be *your* answers – connected to your experience.

Of course, you are not the only one who has ever lived on the planet and asked the same questions. Others have “been there and done that”. They have also handed on what they have discovered. This is good too, because it means you don’t have to “reinvent the wheel”. You can learn from their experience as well, and tap into their wisdom.

This “handing on” takes place within the different communities that people belong to. It could be a religion, or an ethnic group, or a nation, or the human race itself. Each community has its accumulated wisdom. And it’s there for us because we all belong somewhere.

The Church is a community like that. It started when the first disciples of Jesus found themselves bowled over by his resurrection. That was a huge experience, especially after what happened to him on Good Friday. It showed the lengths God would go to for us – how much each of us matters to God. Who can blame them for passing on what they had discovered. It was the kind of experience any of us would want to share with people we care about. That’s why the Church still talks about it.

But I admit this can also be a problem; if someone hasn’t yet had the kind of personal experiences that prepare them for the answers, then it can feel the answers are being “forced” on them. What is really happening is that the answers are not yet connecting with that person’s experience.

What we do is less
than a drop in the
ocean. But if it
were missing, the
ocean would lack
something

Mother Teresa
1910 - 1997



Two things need to come together before the answers can satisfy us:

Certain special experiences of your own, and
the experience of the community that goes back to the apostles.

Your own special experiences

Most of these experiences are still in front of you. They are the kind of experiences that *point beyond themselves to something else*. For example, something wonderful in nature that leaves you feeling you are part of something much bigger than your own lifetime. Or, the sudden feeling that even the good things of life (a good marriage, a successful business, good friends, good health, etc) still leave an empty gap somewhere inside you. Your own deep self tells you that there's something more than all this.

Or, someone you love has died, and suddenly everything around you appears in a different light: the things that seemed so important to you don't seem quite so important now, and the things you knew about only vaguely, like heaven, suddenly seem so real.

Or, some sight or sound or scent will trigger some fond memory, and you know you are still linked to people and places of your past. There's a feeling that they are still part of you, and that one day all good things will come together again.

Or, you might be listening to the kind of music that makes you want to be still and quiet because it seems to be drawing you towards something. Or, in some quiet space on your own, you just experience the mystery of your own self, unique in all the universe. So why?

In all these experiences you are getting hints that there's more to your existence than you might have thought. And they are the kind of experiences you need to have before you can appreciate the answers to your questions.

Somebody else who said all this, perhaps better than I can, is Joy Cowley. I am enclosing something she wrote recently. It made me think of all those young people who wish the answers would come more quickly.

The experience of the community we call the Church

This community's accumulated wisdom is able to help you *interpret* what you experience. Without the experiences that awaken your interest, the community's words will probably just sound like words. But over time, your own experiences will bring you to the brink of wanting to know what others have learned. You will recognise your own experience in what the community says about it. And you will feel more at home.

LINKS

pndiocese.org.nz

pn.catholic.org.nz

The websites of the
diocese

connect.org.nz

The national Catholic
youth website

dyc.net.nz

The website of the
Diocesan Youth
Ministry

diocese of palmerston north

There are other ways the community supports the individual. For example, it challenges you to move beyond a purely self-centred kind of religion. The community's experience can also help individuals to pull their heads in if they are getting "over religious". As we have all seen recently, religious experience can be *mis-interpreted* and some people can become dangerous fanatics. Belonging to the community Jesus founded gives you a benchmark - to reach up to but not go over the top of.

My own journey

The need to integrate personal experience and the Church's experience is a journey we all take. Some years ago I said this in a poem that I will share with you:

*The melody of life is its meaning
and a life that isn't sung
isn't lived.
Even pain can't stop a heart singing
music it knows it has heard.
But sometimes its hard to be sure of what is only hoped for
and convinced of what no one can see.

Not everyone chooses to sing.

Some see shades and think it is night
but shadows mean the day!
Purpose – even half revealed –
lights up the whole
enough for us to see
that if it were night, even shadows wouldn't be.

And so in the day I see and I sing
though clouds overhead cast shadows where I walk
in fragmented light,
and meaning in glimpses leaves questions still.

But music needs words before it's a song
that others can hear and join in.
Already, before me, a pilgrim people
wends its way through a valley
to a chorus mighty, sure and strong.

Is that my journey, is theirs my song?
Can my heart sing except in their midst
if with them is where I belong?

Yet not for me cacophony;
from clutter I must be free.
I'll walk with them and sing their song,
not for me to change their tune.
But I must know which part is mine;
my song must still be me!*

DEFINITION

Cacophony

n., pl. -nies.

ca·coph·o·ny
(kə-kōf'ə-nē)

1. Jarring, discordant sound; dissonance: *heard a cacophony of horns during the traffic jam.*
2. The use of harsh or discordant sounds in literary composition, as for poetic effect.
3. Also a heavy metal band from the 80's

French *cacophonie*, from Greek *kakophō-niā*, from *kakophōnos*

www.answers.com



Conclusion

The mystery of life, the mystery of God, the mystery of suffering and evil - and the mystery of love and goodness in the midst of it all – these are all bigger than you and me. While we are waiting for the answers to be fully revealed, the idea is to stay close to where the answers are being kept alive:

In the community called Christian,
I find people of flesh and blood and ordinary lives
living in expectation of meeting You,
undefeated by their personal failures and by death itself.
I have watched their faces in quiet prayer and in songs of joy;
I have heard their professions of faith and confessions of failure;
I have felt humbled no less by their repentance than by their faithfulness;
I have known their sacrifices,
been empowered by their serenity
and learned the reason for the hope that is in them.
Their sureness is not based on any success of their own
but on what they believe You have done for them.
There is power in what they seem to know,
and all the more striking because human nature is weak.
I thank you Father, for having revealed great things to little ones.
In the community of those who live
now not they but Christ living in them,
I have seen frail human nature raised up
reaching heights of hope and depths of peace
which nothing in the world could give, nor take away.
IN THEIR MIDST I COME TO KNOW
THAT HE who enabled the lame to walk and the blind to see
and sinners to start again
IS RISEN,
for that is what their lives proclaim.
And so I believe in Him whom they have placed their trust.

You can help make the Church more and more *that kind of experience*, for yourself and for others. I am hoping to call at your college and then we can talk about these things.

I wish you joy and God's blessing,

Yours sincerely,

P J Cullinane
Bishop of Palmerston North