

This I Believe

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This is a revised version of the address given as part of the *This I Believe* series, Whanganui, 30 March 2012. Speakers were asked to explain what *deep down* they believe, what accounts for the choices they have made, what gives their lives meaning, what “makes them tick”. I gladly address that question. And even though it is necessarily personal, I strongly suspect you will recognise a lot of common ground.

Experiencing the *mystery of existence*

Where on earth does one start? Well, it actually starts before the earth was formed. As I said in the Personal Witness I wrote a few years ago:

At the one moment in the whole of history
when uniting sperm and ovum
could have been me
(any other combination would have someone else),
You spoke and I came to be.
While gases and dust still swirled about
before the planet was formed and
through every turning point of history and human free choice
you guided the universe towards my life
which later became what you and I would make together.
What else can it mean to believe that
you are Lord of all history
and of my life too, even as you make me free? (*I Believe Within the Church*, Veritas, 2006,
p. 52)

More recently, in fact one day last year, I received in the mail notice that I must re-apply for my driver's licence, bringing with me a doctor's certificate as warrant of my fitness. I soon realised that this was because the earth had cruised around the sun 27,375 times since I was born. That seems to be the magic number because it also signalled the time when I was expected to tender my resignation as Bishop of the Diocese of Palmerston North.

Because I share the life of this planet and must go wherever it goes, I can't help remembering that the ride is taking me even further out into cold, impersonal space, and that one day the whole universe is going to implode. Because I take the sciences seriously, it comes naturally to ask: why am I part of a universe that started with a big bang and looks destined to finish with a bigger one? What is the meaning of it all? And how can I enjoy the planetary ride if I don't discover some satisfying answer to these questions? Or, should I, like a sheep in an affluent paddock, just put my head down and never ask why?

I don't get any comfort from the thought that we're all in this cosmic predicament together. It is still *my existence* that is at stake, even though, paradoxically, I feel I am meant to enjoy it:

Who is this, so much at home where children play,
 but not yet home,
 holding on to what I know, yet yearning for something more?
 Bathed in sun's warming beams
 sinking in the sensuous sand
 drowned in the sound of the sea
 lost in the infinite blue
 gliding through planetary space
 all the time by this log, I am here:
 it is me.

The flower beside me tells of You. (Page 12)

Nature is a sacrament of God's presence. One enters this sacrament through stillness and silence. One of the great tragedies of our era is that many do not. One of my earliest memories concerns a time when I must have about 9 or 10 years old. I was roaming the hills we had leased from our Maori neighbours when I entered under the canopy of a glade of native trees. A lone grey warbler's song accentuated the silence and stillness, and these in turn accentuated the warbler's song. And I became aware of the *mystery* of existence; of time and timelessness entwined. I am not claiming for myself anything that isn't your experience too. It's as if nature around us and above us, as well as our own nature, is trying to tell us something.

How else do you account for those moments when something wonderful in nature 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 only obliquely, 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?

There are moments too when you know that what God wants is also what you yourself most deeply want, even if it is demanding; or you experience a joy you can't fully account for; or you know with deep certainty that you can trust God; or you find yourself thanking God even for the cross you hadn't wanted.

These are parables of daily life in which we discern "the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of life" at work in us and in the world around us, summoning us to life. Recognising God's presence in our lives is how we *see God*. In these moments of wonder, joy, thanksgiving, and trust, we come alive. And becoming fully alive is what God made us for. This is what St Irenaus was saying in the second century: "The glory of God is human beings fully alive; what makes us fully alive is seeing God".

This way of *seeing* God, of recognising God's presence in our world and in our lives, is a kind of *awakening*, an opening of our eyes. That is one of my favourite images for the

“spiritual life.” My other favourite image is *the journey into reality*, which is how we live when we *see*. It includes self-acceptance, and letting go of the rationalisations, masks, excuses, denials and wishful-thinking by which we try to avoid reality. It is the journey towards becoming fully alive; a way of *being* that comes from *seeing* – seeing how much we are loved. It is conversion. And it takes a life-time.

The world in which we see God also has an ugly side to it. In accounting for what makes me tick, I must also take that into account:

This same world which leads me to expect more than it can give
seems unable to tell me what I most need to know.

It cannot tell me that goodness has the last word over evil
and life over death.

I think of broken hearts and people hurt
by loneliness, hunger, fear....

those with nowhere to go and no one to care;
people trapped in illnesses of the mind
or in camps for refugees;

others from whom your gift of life and their right to live
have been torn away by guns or greed
or clinical termination: the result is the same.

I need to know that love’s sacrifices are not all for nothing
and friendship’s joys are forever.

I see the stars and watch the sea and marvel at your glory;
but centuries ago others looked and they are gone....

Someone cried, and we don’t know their names.

O God, do you not have something more to say? (Page 17)

At its best, our present life allows us to possess life’s joys only in fragmented moments, separated by time and place, never all at once and together and for keeps. Death, if nothing else, is the ultimate spoiler. In answer to the question “what now?”, the grave, in fact the whole cosmos, is mercilessly and relentlessly mute. Somehow death itself needs to be overcome, and people’s ability to live fully depends on their knowing that it has been, or

will be, and that “all the good fruits of our nature and enterprise in this life we will find again, cleansed and transfigured....” (Second Vatican Council, *On the Church in the Modern World*, 39).

From nature to history

This is where I must part company with those of our contemporaries who settle, too easily, for what they call “spirituality”. By this they often mean no more than taking one’s place in the universe, living a good life, and being in harmony with the cosmos. Catholic faith, on the other hand, is intrinsically linked to certain historical events involving One who lived, died and rose. Core activities of the Christian faith, namely liturgy and sacraments, are about becoming *personally linked to those historical events*. Mere spirituality would be the same even if those events had never happened.

In other words, I must look beyond what nature can do (it doesn’t do resurrections) to the realm of history where we discover a “mystery hidden from generations and centuries and which has now been revealed.... the mystery is Christ among you, your hope of glory” (Col. 1:26,27).

His real presence among us comes into focus in the liturgy and the sacraments. Nothing influences our Christian and Catholic identity more profoundly than the feasts and seasons of the liturgical year. In a real sense we *re-live the events* of our salvation. We get our identity, and renew it, from doing that.

A theist is one who believes in God, whose real presence we can experience in nature. A Christian is one who believes this God became one of us, really present in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, a participant in human history. A Catholic is one who believes that Jesus of Nazareth is now really present in those who share his risen life, and through whom he still participates in human history. Their name, according to the New Testament scriptures, is: the disciples of Jesus, the saints, the body of Christ, the Church. It is in their midst that I see Christ and find my deepest assurance:

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 or 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,
 the more 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 in whom they have placed their trust. (pp. 20-21)

Vocation

It was within that community that I found myself called to serve in ordained ministry. Who will ever know the real origins of a vocation? I have tried to account for mine as follows:

The fabric of my vocation has been cut from
 the raw materials of an ordinary life and humble background,
 my family and those who loved me before I could understand
 losses and broken hopes, personal failures and healing grace,
 work in the paddocks in Oringi and songs from the cow shed

(where I was happy to be),
centres of learning and far away places,
times of turmoil and trusted friends.

Above all, you have shaped me for ministry to your people
by their own wonderful faith and prayers, hopes and love
in which you revealed to me
your assurances, your love and your expectations.
Helping them to know how much they mean to you
is the privilege your call bestows on me.

Being entrusted with their secrets
and faced with their pain, struggles, hopes and joys;
being privy to the mysteries
of your own dealings with them;
discovering that it was Christ they met
in things I said and did in his name,
and finding I have been ministered to in ministering to them
– these are experiences that surprise, humble and amaze me –
and confront me with the mystery of my own calling.

If now ‘the flower beside me tells of you’,
it is because many years ago, one who loved her flowers
told me your name.

I thank you for a grandmother’s hand
that led a five-year-old-boy, on frosty mornings,
a mile’s walk on a country road
to where we caught a train that took forever
– smoke from coal and wooden seats –
so that I could start with a Catholic education.
It couldn’t last, and didn’t, but could it be
that long forgotten conversations along that country road
sowed flowers that still bloom? (pp. 55-56)

My brief allusion to “centres of learning, far away places, times of turmoil and trusted friends” deserves amplification. From the Brothers at Marist Brothers High School, Palmerston North I picked up my enthusiasm for the Acts of the Apostles, which also played an early part in my vocation. With the Jesuits at Holy Name Seminary Christchurch I first discovered my affinity with philosophy and classical music, and unforgettably learned that “Jesus of Nazareth was passing by”. With the Vincentian Priests in Genoa I discovered my love for theology, and I learned from one of the most remarkable men I have ever known the need for humaneness in interpreting Church law. Studies at the Angelicum, Alphonsianum and Gregorian Universities in Rome, the experience of being there during the Second Vatican Council, my times of teaching at Holy Cross College Mosgiel, parish ministry in Wellington, and my role at the Pastoral Centre during the 1970s, were all part of my preparation for what was to come. I thank God, too, for what Catholic Charismatic Renewal did for me and for the Church during that era. And at various times Religious women especially have contributed to my human and spiritual formation through spiritual direction, directed retreats, truth telling and friendship – especially in “times of turmoil”.

My Journey and the Church’s

My journey and the Church’s journey belong to each other. It seems that in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, the Church wanted bishops who could help implement the reforms intended by the Council. The primary focus of the Council was “renewal”. This has to do with the deepening of our relationship with the Risen Christ, affecting our relationships with one another – what it means to be “the body of Christ”. “Reforms”, on the other hand, are the changes needed to facilitate renewal.

I remain committed to the Council. When I hear talk of “reforming the reform” I think of what G K Chesterton said of Christianity: “it’s not as if it has been tried and found difficult; it was found difficult and not tried.” Wherever the Council was misapplied, or where it was hardly applied at all, the missing factor, in my estimation, was adult catechesis. A previous generation of NZ Bishops – those who personally participated in the Council – could not be accused of failing to provide a post-conciliar adult catechesis. I was involved in it on their behalf. What they didn’t do, and couldn’t, was *prepare us* for the Council.

There is something to learn from the closure, in recent decades, of many Catholic institutions which had been involved in the Church's healing and teaching ministries. Whatever about the strengths and weaknesses of some of our institutional practices, on the whole these institutions did great work: they gave the Church a significant profile and a public platform, the loss of which I grieve. Rightly, the public could point to them as representing "the Church" and doing "the Church's work". But that tended to make "the Church" look like *other people out there*. Now the changing landscape is bringing it home to us that *all* the baptised share responsibility for the mission of the Church, albeit differently, and *all* the baptised are called to holiness. For lay men and women, carrying out the mission of the Church, and growing in holiness, *both come about in the circumstances of their daily secular lives*.

But as well as that, their greater involvement in ministries and apostolates of the Church, in decision-making roles and in the celebration of liturgy, generates its own energies and synergies, which will help to re-shape and re-image the Church, opening up new vistas, new perspectives and new opportunities.

It is the Holy Spirit who creates and renews the Church through charisms given to all the faithful (cf *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n.798). So in the early days of the Diocese of Palmerston North we consecrated the diocese to the Holy Spirit, Pentecost became our patronal feast, and the Acts of the Apostles our "mission statement". We replaced the Diocesan Pastoral Council with five Deanery Pastoral Councils – widening the scope for people's participation and formation, and my involvement with them. "Priests' days" became "pastoral days" to include lay pastoral workers, hospital and prison chaplains, tertiary chaplains and youth ministers, and diocesan staff, (dedicating the annual Priests' Assembly to matters concerning the life and well-being of priests.) The diocese's annual financial report became regional meetings with the Parish Finance Committees. It all amounted to a way of being Church that was based on how the Holy Spirit acts through a variety of gifts – those given at Baptism and those given in the Sacrament of Holy Orders. (cf *Constitution on the Church*, n.4).

Given my commitment to the Council, how do I cope with moves that seem to go back on its reforms? Some of them have been saddening, destructive, and blatantly contrary to Catholic ecclesiology. Well, in the end they can only be like flotsam caught in an eddy on the surface of a river. They even manage to go against the current for a few seconds (or years) as the eddy circles. But they are going nowhere really. The reforms of the Council are the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit. They are like the deep water of the river, which cannot be stopped. In other words, I keep my focus on the big picture. I remember, too, that many of the problems that followed the Council derived from the inadequate formation – scriptural, catechetical and liturgical – Catholics received *before* the Council.

The renewing Church also needs to get out of its own way, i.e. not loom larger than the mission that is its very reason for being, which as Pope Paul VI described it, is

“to bring the good news to all aspects of humanity, and through its influence transform it from within, making humanity itself into something new” (Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n.18).

And he immediately added: “But there can be no new humanity if there are not first of all new persons.” It is our relationship with Christ that transforms ourselves – and all our other relationships. This is how the Gospel is able to permeate and transform society at every level.

Inside Knowledge

There are some things that can only be known from inside the experience. Love itself is like that. It can only be known from inside the experience of loving. It cannot be known by looking on from the outside. So too, our ability to accept the Church’s teachings emanates from inside our relationship with Christ. In chapter 6 of John’s gospel those who didn’t yet know the person of Jesus were the ones who couldn’t accept his teaching. Those who already knew *Him* knew that He was true, and therefore so was His teaching – even if they didn’t understand it either.

And because I belong to a journeying, pilgrim people, I have no problem with the fact that sometimes the Church knows what it knows before it can properly explain. I would expect this to be the case, because the deeper meanings of our faith only come on to our horizons as we journey.

Discerning salvation history in one's own life

On the journey into reality it can be easier to recognise God's presence if we have learnt to recognise God's style. Looking back to the people and the places of earlier stages of one's journey is more than an exercise in geography or genealogy. It is a journey into mystery. God's presence in human history and in our own lives turns ordinary history into salvation history – the extraordinary side of the ordinary. The raw material is the same for both, but within history a Purpose is unfolding that cannot be thwarted by history's twists and turns. That is why we often find that the very times when we were most assailed by doubt or despair turned out to be break-throughs to new hope.

I recommend to you the practice of diarying your own experiences of dying and rising, of valleys and hill-tops. I have always found it nurturing to go back and touch again those moments when I have been most alive to God's presence. It seems to be through *remembering*, that the graces are renewed – and the tears and the healings too. And it is easier, looking back, to discern any pattern in the story of God's dealings with us, especially when God seems not to be hearing at all:

You have never abandoned me
 even when you seemed most absent,
 for you entered my life more fully at those times
 when *aloud and in silent tears I prayed to the One who had the power*
 to make things different – but didn't,
 because you wanted me to choose your will instead
 and be more at one with you.

When you allowed me to experience failure and confusion
 it was in order to unmask the falseness
 of self-sufficiency and self-justification

and make me place all my hope and trust in you.

Through the valley of darkness, therefore,
you have led me more surely
and enabled me, even *out of the depths*
to thank you with joy.

I would bless the cross that took me there,
but you already have. (Page 53)

Signing off

I recently signed off as bishop of the diocese. At such a time it comes naturally to think of one's failures and of lost opportunities. But of these I will say what Kierkegaard said of sin – it's opposite is not virtue but grace.

It has been an extraordinary privilege to serve Christ and his people in this ministry. However, if there is reason for wonder at what I became, this is all the more because of where I came from. I have always felt humbled by the mystery of how one who grew up in the paddocks of Oringi became a bishop of the Church and first bishop of the Diocese of Palmerston North.

In a letter expressing thanks for my 32 years as bishop, the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples reminded me that my apostolate will become mainly one of prayer and sacrifice. It was a helpful reminder of how each of us can continue in the service of Christ until our last breath.

Dying is not something that should merely happen *to us*. It is something we *co-operate in*. It is too important not to be included in the *living* of one's life. And so, I practise my part by beginning each day with that act of adoration we all know as the Glory Be...

All this is strangely familiar. It brings to mind a holy picture given me in my childhood featuring Jesus in the garden and the prayer he prayed when confronted by his death: “not mine but your will be done”. I have been told that was the prayer my father also prayed when he was dying, leaving a young wife and four children, one of them only one week old. What makes me tick goes back a long way.

There is an understandable expectation that a bishop will be buried in the Cathedral city of his diocese. However, I have chosen to be buried with my parents in Dannevirke. It was my parents who mediated to me the gift of life and with it God’s purpose for my life. For all of us, God’s purpose unfolds within the humble, ordinary circumstances of our lives, beginning where our lives began. And so, having carried out my calling, I am returning, as it were, to my whenua. And the Gospel reading I have chosen for my funeral is a one-liner in which Jesus says: *when you have done all that was commanded you, you are to say we have only done what it was our duty to do* (cf Luke 17:10).

May the last word on my life be ‘thank you’
 for all that has been and all that will be.
 And when my life belongs to the distant past
 and all our names have been forgotten,
 may it be that I – together with those I loved and those who loved me –
 was entrusted by the community called Christian
 to the One called Christ.
 Grant me the grace to *look forward to His coming again*,
 as she surely did who prays for us
 ‘now and at the hour of our death’ (page 57)

But before we come to that, there’s the matter of retirement and what it means. A friend of mine was the Bishop of Galloway, Scotland, before his retirement. At the end of a delightful little book reflecting on his ministry he says:

Retired bishops in the past were ‘transferred’ to ‘titular sees *in partibus infidelium*’
 i.e. dioceses that no longer existed. Now that somewhat coy fiction has been

abandoned and ‘a bishop whose resignation from office has been accepted acquires the title “emeritus” of his diocese.’ (Canon 402 #1)

The word sounds fitting and worthy, perhaps something like ‘meritorious’. So I looked up my Latin dictionary: ‘*emeritus* – one who has served his time, a veteran, unfit for service, worn out.’

To which I say, don’t count me out yet!