

# A LETTER TO YOUNG PEOPLE FROM BISHOP PETER

1999

## Part I

### Good Reason to Wonder

#### Introduction

If you sometimes wonder about your life – what it all means – then this letter is to you, from someone who believes in wondering.

The more I wonder at the exploding galaxies, red hot stars and ice cold planets, and billions of years and billions of miles that make up “the universe”, the more I wonder what my little flicker of life could mean within it all. Yet, I belong within this massive universe, and in some way I always did. Is it any wonder that I wonder?

Then I find that at the heart of it all is love – personal, intimate, gratuitous, extraordinary, ‘reckless’, love. What is unfolding is all guided by love. And the outcome promises to be beyond our wildest imagining. I find it all pretty overwhelming.

So that’s a little bit about me. Now, about you.

#### My reason for writing

Your life is not a chance moment in the long history of the universe. It is a “calling” and it has a purpose. No other person could ever substitute for you. I hope you will be able to *see* that, and *wonder* at it. Each of us needs to *come alive* to the miracle of our own life and our place in the universe.

There is a contribution to the history of the world that can only come from you. When people don’t develop their full potential, it’s because they never quite believe they are special or that they can make any difference to what the world is like.

I believe otherwise; that is why I want to say why your life is a *calling*.

God doesn’t impose on you. In fact, your best hopes for yourself and God’s best hopes for you are the same. When he chose *you*, He chose what you yourself most deeply want, because that’s part of who you are.

So when you are being true to your best self, you are being true to God. And being true to God is how we become our true self.

Perhaps it’s too soon to know exactly what you might be doing in 5 years from now. But one thing is certain: your future will affect you more than it affects others. So what you do with your life is not something you want to be talked into – or talked out of – by others.

### **God has chosen you**

The best reason for believing in yourself is because God has chosen you – so it's not based on what other people think about you. At the moment you were conceived, there was only one chance in more than a million that it would be you. Any other combination of sperm and ovum would have been a different person. And the one moment when you could have come into existence would have passed forever. It really was *you* God chose.

It wasn't just the beginning of your life that God chose; it was your whole life. When you realise this, it opens up a whole new dimension for you.

To know the meaning of your life, you need to be in touch with God in a personal way – through friendship and closeness, talking and listening, being faithful, being in tune.... You also need to know how to read God's "writing". God wrote your personal calling into your "heart" and your talents. Your deepest longings and hopes, and even your concerns and anxieties all point to something beyond what you already have.

God has also written to you in the circumstances of your life. It involves what you most need to do, and what the world most needs from you. The place where God calls you is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

This means making decisions and choices. Every person's journey sooner or later meets cross-roads – when choosing one direction excludes other options. Don't get paralysed by trying to keep all your options open! Freedom and fulfilment and peace of mind come through *decision and commitment* – not through trying to keep all options open.

Sometimes the options in front of us are big and sometimes they are small; for example, when we choose between putting a little more kindness into the world or a little less kindness; more honesty or less honesty; more forgiveness or less forgiveness, and so on. Whether it's a big choice or just a little one, you can sometimes know which is the right choice by putting yourself at the far end of your life and looking back – the choices that will give you *the most gladness* then are the choices that are right for you now.

### **Your life on a larger screen**

I mentioned that God has written your personal calling into your *life* with all its circumstances. But this doesn't mean you are left on your own to read God's "word" to you. God works through others, all the way back through "salvation history". That is where we look to get a picture of God's "style". When we have learned to recognise God's "ways" in the unfolding of salvation history, it's easier to recognise his "style" in our own life.

God's revelation has become absorbed in the lives of those who take it to heart and become "God's people". The early Christians put their experience down in the writings of the New Testament. These scriptures become a kind of mirror where we see ourselves in the light of God's purposes.

In the liturgy, the Church holds this mirror up to us. In the different seasons and feasts of the liturgy it holds the mirror at different angles – always reflecting the way God is present in people's lives, including our own.

If we walk away from the practice of our faith we effectively walk out of the mirror-frame where we are revealed to ourselves in the light of God's purposes. We walk out on ourself!

God's marvellous plan, and human history's wonderful outcome, have been revealed by God:

God has let us know the mystery of his purpose, the hidden plan he so kindly made **in Christ** from the beginning, to act upon when the times had run their course to the end; that he would bring everything together under Christ, as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth....

The very mystery that has been kept hidden in God through all the ages is now revealed – and dispensed – **through the Church**. (Eph. 1:9,10; 3:8-10)

We need to be where we can see and hear what God is saying to us.

Of course you can also look up the gospels for yourself, and get some real close-ups of what Jesus was like and how he would speak to you; or, the Acts of the Apostles for first-hand impressions of what it was like in those early days after Jesus' resurrection. Things happened then that have touched *your* life.

### **Your place in history**

Christians know that the worst that could ever happen in history has already happened – on Good Friday – and that even that was turned into life and joy on Easter Sunday. We are those who already know history's wonderful outcome, and live in anticipation of it. This is where *hope* comes from. And it transforms our whole outlook on life.

Waiting for God's purposes to be *fully* revealed can be hard at times. It was hard for Jesus' disciples on Good Friday. But now at least we know there is nothing too "secular" or too ordinary or too ugly to be outside of God's purposes, in which He is bringing about a "*universal reign of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love and peace*" (Mass for Christ the King).

Through baptism and confirmation *you* are called to live "in communion" with Christ so that his power to reconcile and to make all things new (2 Cor. 5:16-20) can be present wherever *you* are present. You matter.

This is why I wanted to say to you: your life isn't just what *happens* to you – it is what you choose to do in response to the One who gave you life and calls you.

## **Part II**

### **Particular Callings**

#### **The special calling of marriage**

What we **do** with our lives is also a *calling*. Marriage is a natural event, but it is also a *calling*. And much more than just being partners.

The special calling of every Christian is “to be for others”. In that way we find our own true self. As the wedding Mass puts it: *love is our origin, love is our constant calling, love is our fulfilment in heaven.*

The wedding Mass also says marriage is like a *mirror of God’s love*. It reflects the characteristics of God’s love. These were made visible to us in the life of Jesus. Above all on the cross, God’s love is revealed as total self-giving, uncalculating, forgiving, faithful to the end, and life-giving.

The special vocation of husbands and wives is to show that this kind of love **is possible**. It’s God who makes it possible by making **his love present in their love** for each other. That’s why Christian marriage is a *sacrament*.

This is also why people choose to marry “before the altar”. That is where Christ’s love for us on calvary is still celebrated. They want to love each other as completely as he loved us. It’s about a *commitment* to each other, not just “a feeling for each other”.

This will be the high calling of most of you. Don’t settle for a lesser vision. Look up to yourself.

### **Other special callings**

There are other ways of *being for others*. Some choose a dedicated single life, i.e. dedicated to serving others, and making personal sacrifices to follow their calling.

Many of these take the vows of religious life, giving up perfectly good options, including marriage and financial independence. They are making a personal statement; they are reminding us that the best of life is still to come:

The human eye hasn’t seen nor the ear heard, nor can we even imagine, how wonderful the future God has in store for those who love him. (1 Cor.2:9)

No one can take it for granted that the vocation of a religious sister or brother is only for “someone else”. There are many young people today who want to spend their life in the best possible way, and this is an option.

Just look around and see what kind of impact other people are making on the world. There are those with power and wealth, who can, at the stroke of a pen, eliminate jobs and make other people “superfluous”. Then there are people like the late Mother Theresa. Empty-handed, she brought vision and hope even where there didn’t seem to be anything – only hopelessness and death. And the world respected her. When the history books of the future are written, her name will be remembered forever. The people at the top of industry and commerce probably won’t even make the footnotes.

It’s not that she’s “different”. She started her life the same way as you did. She was a very ordinary person – with even less opportunities than you’ve had.

Historically, religious sisters and brothers have been at the frontiers of providing education, hospitals, orphanages, leprosaria, etc. They were meeting these needs before anyone else did. Today others have taken over, and so religious sisters and brothers look for new ways of

going out to the frontiers of human need. It is only the shapes and forms of religious life that are changing.

### **Priests**

Another way of “being for others” is the life of a priest.

To describe his own role in our lives, Jesus pictured himself as the good shepherd. In his time, the shepherd led his small flock out at the beginning of each day. Then he spent the whole day with them, leading them to better pastures. It was a very intimate relationship. He knew each sheep by name, and they knew him. They knew he would help them, and they trusted him. He was *there for them*.

This is the image which the Church has used ever since to picture the role of those it calls “pastors”. Sometimes, priests have fallen short of this ideal. (And sometimes they have got more publicity than all the others who have faithfully given their lives for their people.)

There is actually comfort in knowing that Jesus calls people who are *ordinary human beings*. St Peter himself tried to talk Jesus out of calling him, because he felt so unworthy. Jesus knew this, and still called *him* (Luke 5:1-11).

It is always Jesus who reaches out through the ministry of his priests. He has “sent” them, and has authorised them to speak and act in his name. That is what he does in the sacrament of Holy Orders.

To underline the importance of what they “preach” priests are asked to put their lives where their mouths are. That is what celibacy is about. It is a way of saying “hey, what I want you to know is so wonderful that I am prepared to stake everything for it.”

A vocation to priesthood is not about being a special person; everyone is. Nor is it about being “worthy”; no one is. It’s about knowing what life is like for people, but with a love so wide and so inclusive that it can’t be narrowed down to just one special relationship.

It too is a *commitment*, not just “feeling like it”. Liking it comes later on – at all those special moments when you rejoice deeply because you have done something very special for someone, something that will matter to them forever, and which you were able to do because you were a priest.

You don’t have to know yet if you are suitable, because others will help you decide that. After all, a vocation is not just about what *we* want to do. It is a calling – from God through the Church.

The only question each person must be able to answer (and that no one else can answer for them) is “am I willing?” Christ does the rest, no matter how ordinary we are. He’s got a way of revealing his power through human weakness (cf 2 Cor. 12:9,10)

Have you ever asked yourself what you would say if Christ called you to re-*present* him (i.e. make him *present*) in this way? Personally, I know full well what one gives up; but I also know I would do the same all over again.

## Part III

### The Right Time

The right time to consider what might be your role in the world is not when things are better, but when someone is needed to make them better. Generous young people are among those who are stepping forward to make a difference in the world around them.

A renewal unleashed by Pope John XIII is beginning to transform the Church, too. It's a great time to participate, and more are getting involved.

Since the Diocese of Palmerston North began in 1980, I have many times invited people to turn to the Acts of the Apostles to see what it was like being a follower of Jesus in those earliest days after his resurrection; - what it was like being empowered by the Holy Spirit; why people were prepared to sacrifice so much and still experience great joy; and what the Church could yet be like.

If you are eligible for the life of a priest or religious sister or religious brother, I have no hesitation in inviting you to consider it. How would you know Jesus isn't calling you if you haven't seriously considered it?

Here's a check list of the qualities you would need:

- a love for God and God's plan for our salvation;
- a strong desire to serve others even if it costs you;
- personal integrity and an ability to be flexible and adaptable;
- an ability to enjoy silence and the presence of God, and an ability to enjoy being with others;
- the ability to see celibacy as a positive and healthy choice, and a way of *being for others*;
- the ability and the desire to study;
- a sense of humour.

#### Getting ready for whatever God wants for you

Speaking to young people in Kazakhstan on 23 September, 2001, Pope John Paul II said to them:

Realise that each one of you is of unique worth, and be ready to accept one another and each one's convictions as you search together for the fullness of truth. Open yourselves to the one who created you out of love and wants to make you worthy, free and good people. Learn to listen in silence to the voice of God, who speaks in the depths of every heart; build your lives on sure and solid foundations; do not be afraid of commitment and sacrifice, which today require a great investment of energies, but are the guarantee of success tomorrow. Discover the truth about yourselves, and new horizons will not cease to open up before you.

Whatever your calling, I wish you every blessing and happiness.

Yours sincerely,

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### A Daily Prayer

Dear God, you are love  
and I am made in your image.

Help me to make my life  
a channel of your love  
flowing into the world.

I hope the world will be a better place  
because I was here.

Help me to know what you had in mind  
when you chose *me*.

Thank you for making my life  
worthwhile for ever,  
by what Jesus has done for me.  
Amen