



You will be my witnesses

A Pastoral Letter from the Catholic Bishops of Australia

World Youth Day provides a powerful theme, *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses (Acts 1: 8)*. Through the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to witness to Jesus Christ, which means we ought be inviting as many as possible to share in the forgiveness and salvation Jesus has won for all of us. In their emphasis on the new evangelisation, recent Popes have stressed this same message.

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While many in the world have never heard of Jesus, in our own society many have heard of him, but not responded. Others in our society have begun to believe, but their faith in the Lord Jesus has waned, especially in terms of their relationship with the Church, the Body of Christ. The reasons for this are many and varied. Whatever the reason, this has resulted in a situation where the Church community is impoverished because of their absence. While we address this letter to the community of faith worshipping the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in the Eucharistic celebration, it is really our brothers and sisters, who are absent from our worshipping community, who are the subject of this letter.

Jesus Christ lives in his Church

Many of us, bishops, priests, grandparents, parents and others feel a deep personal pain, anxiety, even guilt at this loss. Have we failed in being true witnesses to Jesus? Have we resisted the power the Holy Spirit has given us? A further concern is that our brothers and sisters are not regularly in touch with the Mystery of our salvation, which is the risen Christ, and therefore, they are somewhat removed from that very full manifestation of the love of the Father that is made present in the Church.

While the Spirit blows where he will, and Jesus comes to us in our ordinary everyday life especially through the poor and needy (Mt 25), Jesus' command to “Do this in memory of me” is only carried out in the Church. We recognize that the Mass lies at the very heart of our Catholic faith. The sacraments too, which many who are distant from the Church still seek, are a further encounter





with Jesus that is not present elsewhere. The sacraments are really the most intense and intimate expressions of that life-giving community of disciples, that fellowship in Jesus, which is the Church. This is the work of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. It is in the Church that Jesus and the Father have uniquely come and made their home (Jn 14:23).

Re-connecting

What can we do to address this situation? Firstly, we must ensure that our parish communities are genuinely welcoming and respectful. Why should people come back to us, if the welcome they receive is no better than it was previously? Secondly, we need to go in search of those who are no longer with us, like a shepherd reaching out to the lost sheep (Jn 10). This is much harder, but it is perhaps even more necessary. It will involve a variety of approaches. It runs the risk of rejection, but that is a risk which the new evangelisation demands. Many of those to whom we want to reach out could be just looking for or waiting for, even unconsciously, a word of welcome, encouragement or invitation.

The right approach is essential. Only slowly can one broach the delicate questions of faith and conscience with those we are seeking. Jesus himself, the Good Shepherd, is surely the model for us in this regard. The approach will often take the form of allowing them to tell their story in a context of sharing our faith. Whatever form it takes, it should arise from their need, not ours.

Sharing hope

Who is to meet this challenge? Every member of the Church. We are all responsible. No one can excuse themselves from this responsibility, because it flows from the Baptism that we all share. Some of the faithful feel that they do not have the necessary theological training to make such an approach or to engage in deeper conversation about the faith. St Peter tells us, *Always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you have.* (1 Peter 3:15). Sharing your faith with people is sometimes better and more convincing than theological argumentation. Faith speaks to the heart, and the heart responds to God.

Our personal witness can also be supported by other means: strategies and programmes designed for this purpose; prayer and bible study groups; effective use of the media and modern technology. There are now many Catholic websites, some interactive in a way that could be helpful in making and sustaining contact with people. It is important that parishes and other communities explore which strategies and programmes are most suited to their particular situation. We Bishops have just commissioned a new programme called *Reconnect*. It invites all Catholics to reconsider their participation in the life of the Church. (Contact 1300 4 FAITH – 1300 432 484).

World Youth Day will challenge all those who have Jesus in their heart to reflect more deeply on their relationship with him. It may well be the occasion for many to turn again to the family of the Church. We must continue to reflect on its theme: *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses* (Acts 1: 8).

When Pope Benedict XVI, the Vicar of Christ on earth, celebrates Mass at Randwick, it will be a unique expression of our Catholic faith. We invite all to join us in the family of the Church around our chief Shepherd. Let us boldly witness to our faith!

The Catholic Bishops of Australia
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