

**BENet 2019 Program
Panel Keynote
Thursday 3 October 2019**

Exploring the future of Benedictine education – appreciating the ancient and the new

“What might the Church of the future look like where young people have a voice?”

Fr David Ranson

I can only answer the question from my limited context: Australian, Western, male – informed by my Cistercian background but also my own current role of leadership for a diocese. I cannot speak for every context.

For my reflections I draw principally from *Christus Vivit*- the recent Apostolic Exhortation to the Youth of the World by Pope Francis, and a 2017 presentation by a young woman of our Diocese of Broken Bay, Ashleigh Green, an appointed observer at the Synod on Youth that is the precedent to *Christus Vivit*.¹ If we wish to answer the question I recommend a careful reading of the Exhortation – it really presents as a portrait of the Church of the future.

I wish to share six features of a future Church in which young people have a voice.

- 1. Firstly, a Church of the future in which young people have a voice will one that is safe – because the Church of the past has not always been so. It has not been so, precisely because we have not attended to the voice of the child. This is fundamental. There can be no future in a Church that is experienced as unsafe. So, we must work relentlessly to create communities of safety and care in which young people in fact have a voice in regard to what makes them experience safety.**

The Royal Commission has suggested that one of the key protective strategies is affording children and young people a voice in their own protection. Because children and young people understand and experience safety differently from adults, adults and organizations need to understand what safety means to kids and act to respond to their fears and concerns.

Child participation involves encouraging and enabling children to make their views known on the issues that affect them. Put into practice, participation is adults listening to children – to all their multiple and varied ways of communicating. It ensures their freedom to express themselves and takes their views into account when coming to decisions that affect them. Engaging children in dialogue and exchange allows them to learn constructive ways of influencing the world around them.²

¹ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, “Christ Lives,” Apostolic Exhortation to Young People and to the Entire People of God (25 March 2019), and Ashleigh Green, Presentation for International Seminar on Young People, Rome, 11 September 2017, <http://mediablog.catholic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Presentation-for-International-Seminar-on-Young-People-Ashleigh-Green.pdf>.

² From Tim Moore, ACU Institute of Child Protection Studies, Protective Participation: The Voices of Young People on Safety” (2018):

2. As safe, a Church in which young people have a voice is one that will be alive, ever new, and always open to renewal

From *Christus Vivit* nn. 139, 142-243

Sometime ago, a friend asked me what I see in a young person. My response was that “I see someone who is searching for his or her own path, who wants to fly on their two feet, who faces the world and looks at the horizon with eyes full of the future, full of hope as well as illusions. A young person stands on two feet as adults do, but unlike adults, whose feet are parallel, he always has one foot forward, ready to set out, to spring ahead. Always racing onward. To talk about young people is to talk about promise and to talk about joy. Young people have so much strength; they are able to look ahead with hope. A young person is a promise of life that implies a certain degree of tenacity. He is foolish enough to delude himself, and resilient enough to recover from that delusion”.

Keep following your hopes and dreams. But be careful about one temptation that can hold us back. It is anxiety. Anxiety can work against us by making us give up whenever we do not see instant results. Our best dreams are only attained through hope, patience and commitment, and not in haste. At the same time, we should not be hesitant, afraid to take chances or make mistakes. Avoid the paralysis of the living dead, who have no life because they are afraid to take risks, to make mistakes or to persevere in their commitments. Even if you make mistakes, you can always get up and start over, for no one has the right to rob you of hope.

Dear young people, make the most of these years of your youth. Don't observe life from a balcony. Don't confuse happiness with an armchair, or live your life behind a screen. Whatever you do, do not become the sorry sight of an abandoned vehicle! Don't be parked cars, but dream freely and make good decisions. Take risks, even if it means making mistakes. Don't go through life anaesthetized or approach the world like tourists. Make a ruckus! Cast out the fears that paralyze you, so that you don't become young mummies. Live! Give yourselves over to the best of life! Open the door of the cage, go out and fly! Please, don't take early retirement.

This is what the Church of the future itself might look like if we listen to the voice of young people

3. A Church in which young people have a voice will be responsive to the anxieties of the emerging generation, because it has deeply listened.

Ashleigh Green has observed

In our National Synod Survey, young people seemed to recognise the Church's effort to listen but were at times frustrated by the Church's ability to do so. Significantly, from the results of the online survey, on a scale of 1-10 with 10 being very positive, young people in Australia score the Church's listening ability to be 6 out of 10.

This is picked up by Francis in *Christus Vivit*, nn 65-67

The Synod recognized that the members of the Church do not always take the approach of Jesus. Rather than listening to young people attentively, “all too often, there is a tendency to provide pre-packaged answers and ready-made solutions, without allowing their real questions to emerge and facing the challenges they pose”. Yet once the Church sets aside narrow preconceptions and listens carefully to the young, this empathy enriches her, for “it allows young people to make their own contribution to the community, helping it to appreciate new sensitivities and to consider new questions”.

We adults can often be tempted to list all the problems and failings of today's young people. Perhaps some will find it praiseworthy that we seem so expert in discerning difficulties and dangers. But what would be the result of such an attitude? Greater distance, less closeness, less mutual assistance.

The ability to discern pathways where others only see walls, to recognize potential where others see only peril. That is how God the Father see things; he knows how to cherish and nurture the seeds of goodness sown in the hearts of the young. Each young person's heart should thus be considered "holy ground", a bearer of seeds of divine life, before which we must "take off our shoes" in order to draw near and enter more deeply into the Mystery.

But a Church which **has** listened to the voice of young people will be a Church socially engaged (with 'proximity'/nearness/closeness – to use the language of Pope Francis) with the issues of

- Mental health
- Aloneness
- Climate Concern
- Migration

Again, to refer to Ashleigh Green

In our recent National Synod Survey, young people were very clear on the places and issues with which the Church needs to become more involved. Top on the list of issues facing young people in Australia was mental health. In the survey comments, many young people indicated that the Church could assist them and their friends with mental health, along with some of the other major issues they face, which were identified as school and study, body image and drugs and alcohol. . . In Australia today, suicide is the leading cause of death in people aged 15–24 and accounts for 31% of deaths in this age category. It is no secret that mental health becomes more difficult to manage with isolation and loneliness.

4. A Church in which young people have a voice will be inclusive of diversity of experience whilst faithful to its Tradition

A Church that can truly live with the coincidence of opposites and not frightened by paradox.

Ashleigh Green:

One of the biggest deterrents to young people's full engagement in the Church is the perception that the Church is "closed" to people who are different or who hold views that do not align with Church teaching. It is my experience that many young people give up on the Church before even giving it a go, out of fear that they cannot engage in open, honest discussion about the issues that matter to them. This year I was involved in facilitating the "Synod video booth" in my Diocese. The booth travelled around to various youth events in the Diocese, and young people were invited to answer the question, "If you had one minute to say anything to Pope Francis, what would you say?" As a facilitator of this booth, I remember one young person who, upon being asked this question hesitated and told me, "I'd better not say what I really think. My views are too radical to share at Church." After five minutes of encouraging this girl to openly share her thoughts, she went ahead and shared her experience of topics such as homosexuality and transgender issues being shut down at her Catholic

School. I was really struck by this young person's experience of the disconnect between Church and the rest of the world. It was as if there were some matters that were out of bounds in Church settings, yet these were the issues that she was most passionate about and which gave her life. Similar sentiments were shared in the online survey, with comments such as: "We push aside [issues] pretending they're not as important as they are. We need to focus on what is important in our society today..." The Church can still maintain its stance on key issues, while welcoming young people whose views don't necessarily align. If young people feel that Church is a place where they are loved and welcomed regardless of their background, their identity and their stance on social issues, our Church will become a much more vibrant place. As a Church, if we are to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, we need to be a Church that engages with those on the margins, and which includes young people who may feel ostracised for their views and identity.

This is again picked up by Francis, *Christus Vivit* nn, 199-200

If we journey together, young and old, we can be firmly rooted in the present, and from here, revisit the past and look to the future. To revisit the past in order to learn from history and heal old wounds that at times still trouble us. To look to the future in order to nourish our enthusiasm, cause dreams to emerge, awaken prophecies and enable hope to blossom. Together, we can learn from one another, warm hearts, inspire minds with the light of the Gospel, and lend new strength to our hands.

Roots are not anchors chaining us to past times and preventing us from facing the present and creating something new. Instead, they are a fixed point from which we can grow and meet new challenges. It does us no good "to sit down and long for times past; we must meet our culture with realism and love and fill it with the Gospel. We are sent today to proclaim the Good News of Jesus to a new age. We need to love this time with all its opportunities and risks, its joys and sorrows, its riches and its limits, its successes and failures."

5. A Church in which young people have a voice will have imaginative forms of community

The need to create new forms of community bridging 'school' and 'parish'

Refer to the Australian Jesuit initiative of the Two Wolves Café, part of the wider Cardoner project of overseas immersions.³

Listening to these new circles of conversation

6. A Church in which young people have a voice will have imaginative forms of worship with the capacity to articulate to the Eucharist.

The importance of the Festival, the festive – the lessons from World Youth Day, Australian Catholic Youth Festival etc

³ See <http://thecardonerproject.org>

Conclusion

Christus Vivit n.201

During the Synod, one of the young auditors from the Samoan Islands spoke of the Church as a canoe, in which the elderly help to keep on course by judging the position of the stars, while the young keep rowing, imagining what waits for them ahead. Let us steer clear of young people who think that adults represent a meaningless past, and those adults who always think they know how young people should act. Instead, let us all climb aboard the same canoe and together seek a better world, with the constantly renewed momentum of the Holy Spirit.

Final word to Ashleigh Green

Last month I was on a bush walk with my grandmother in the Blue Mountains, an ancient, rugged region west of Sydney. My grandmother is active, both in body and in spirit and she has a special ability to find beauty and wisdom in the simplest things. Last month as we were walking in the bush near her house, we passed a fallen tree. The tree looked as if it had fallen some time ago, but was flourishing with new, green foliage along the length of the fallen trunk. As we passed the fallen trunk, my Nan said something that struck me. She said, "New life has come from that fallen tree because it's roots are still in the ground." I took a closer look at the tree and noticed that its roots were entrenched in the earth more firmly than even some of the trees nearby that were still standing. No wonder this tree was flourishing. It was fallen but it was alive. And significantly, new life was forming along the whole length of the tree trunk, in places perhaps where foliage doesn't normally grow... My hope is that through this Synod process young people feel listened to by the Church in a way that is unprecedented. My hope is that young people are empowered to speak boldly, to speak clearly and to speak their minds. Our Church doesn't look like it did 50 years ago. Now is the time to be creative. Now is the time to pay attention to where along the tree trunk new life is growing, and to respond with an open heart.