

POMPALLIER LECTURE 2007: THE GREEN SEASON

(for the Catholic Institute of Theology, Aotearoa/New Zealand)

Greetings dear Friends.

Thank you for inviting me to share this time with you. The talk will not be erudite or political. I can't even call it a lecture. It is simply a happy celebration of our Catholic faith and I am very glad to have this public opportunity to let my heart overflow in gratitude. Over the years, nearly all of my retreats and prayer days have been in an ecumenical context, celebrating a common Christian heritage, and that too has been blessing. But this is special. This is „family“ time. I mean to show no disrespect for our Christian neighbours by making this a feast day for our own „house“ - the Catholic Church of Aotearoa - and all that it means to us. Moreover, I make the celebration unconditional. There are no exceptions, no divisions no „but“ or „if only“. We celebrate the light and the shade, the sacred and the human, the richness of our history – personally and collectively. And because God hasn't finished with us yet, we'll also be leaning towards the future to celebrate and bless the growing space of our Catholic faith.

The talk will be more or less in four parts. It will begin with introduction and a statement of faith. It will embrace the heart of our faith – the Word made Flesh in Christ Jesus. We'll celebrate the history of the global Church and then, we will narrow our focus to the Catholic Church of Aotearoa and the gift it is to this country and the world.

Introduction? I speak from feminine experiential lay spirituality that has its home in the Catholic Church of Aotearoa. I came into the Church 26 years ago. I'm quite happy with the word „convert“ although I think that for most people like me, conversion is a long slow experience that happens before we actually come into the Church. Through God's grace, we've already grown into a deep awareness of mystery and sacramental love, and our faith is catholic before it finds its official place in the Catholic Church. Which is why so many converts talk about „coming home.“ The church is the home their hearts already know.

During this talk, I ask you to hold anything I say in an open hand. If it doesn't connect with you, let it pass. What is meaningful to me may not be a part of your experience. And be aware that I use words as a means to an end, as signs and symbols. All words, I pray, will point to that sacred place in our lives, where words disappear in Mystery. What we say about God is not God but only how we perceive God to be. However, we all have within us a “knowing“ that is beyond perception. I believe that the truth that Jesus talked about, doesn't come through the ordinary workings of the mind, but through the heart, and the path to the heart is called devotion. It is the path of love. And it sets us free.

So in talking about the way God works in us as Church, I will mostly use metaphor, parable, stories that take us to the edge of Truth but do not attempt to define it.

Let's start with a few definitions. What exactly, do I mean by faith? Most of us are a little fuzzy on that word. Some see faith as absolute belief in Catholic teaching. Others see faith as a day-to-day dependency on God. Still others make a distinction between faith and religion. For me, the word faith has an outer meaning and an inner meaning, definably different and yet inseparable. I could call them religion and spirituality. Catholic faith for me, is both – religion the container and spirituality the contents. Someone once said that religion draws straight lines and Spirituality writes between the lines. Another meaningful image for me is map and journey. Catholic teaching provides us with maps for the journey, but we have to make the journey. We can't sit reading and quoting maps as a substitute for the faith journey. Nor would I suggest that any pilgrim throw out the maps the Church gives us. However, because we are all uniquely created, life experience will have us writing personal notes on the maps we've been given. The path over here might be blocked for me right now. But here on the map is a road that leads to a life-giving oasis which I've only just noticed.

The map the Church gives, is broad-based. It has guidance for all stages of journey and that guidance is important. It holds us collectively and individually. Without we can wander around in deserts of our own making.

We worship as a sacramental community, but our relationship with God is uniquely one to one. As someone once said, „Each soul is God's favourite.“ And ultimately, that is what the faith is for all of us. Every aspect of Catholic teaching is designed to bring us into the mystery of God's love, but each of us is responsible for our own journey. I like to call that journey „Life experience with awareness“ or „A reflective life“ because that's what it is. A little later I'll say a few words about the stages of the journey, but here I'd just like to say that I speak for most of us here when I say that our personal relationship with God is contained within the Church that nourishes it and sustains it through the Eucharist, through Scripture and through Catholic teaching.

I probably need to give you some personal word definitions because the language of faith has been around for a long time and we tend to use it automatically. But the meanings of words will change for us as we journey. Let's take for example, the big little word „God.“ How has that changed for you since you were a child? By the time I was in my late twenties, my early images of God had so changed that I felt I could no longer use that word. I looked for substitute words: First Principle, Prime Mover, The Source, the Ground of all Being, The Great Spirit, Abundant Giver, Lover of the Soul. Of course, I wasn't talking about God but my own perceptions of God. In the end it seemed a

lot simpler to come back to that simple three-letter word which is now larger than any definition. If I have to describe how I see to God these days, it would be as the eternal lover – and that is without gender.

I believe that nothing exists outside God's love.

With age and a heap of life experience, faith does become simpler - surer. At a recent retreat I asked 29 people to write and share a personal creed that described their present faith journey. One woman in her 70s wrote just one sentence. „I believe in less and less and more and more.“ When she read that, many of us of sighed with the pleasure of recognition. We knew exactly what she meant. (I might add that I have her permission to share her statement with others.) If you were to ask me for my personal creed, I'd probably describe it in a simple story. Something like this: I believe that we come from the greater reality we call God, and return to that reality, and our short time of incarnation is for the growth of the soul. Life school is not easy. In fact, I think the good old Catholic concept of purgatory describes aspects of it. There can be no growth without tension. That's a law of nature. Lessons can be hard in Life School and if we fail exams we often have to sit them again – and again – and again. But for all the tension, the failure, the pain, incarnation is glorious. I'm sure the angels must envy us!

I believe that every soul comes from God and can never be lost to God. I believe that we all have that little spark of the Divine in us that yearns to be reunited with God. I believe that from time to time in human history, larger sparks of the Divine have come to help and inspire us in our struggles. We call those people saints. Two thousand years ago, the great fire of God joined us in the person of Jesus Christ. He went through everything we could ever expect, including torture and death, to show us the truth of the way. I believe that he still companions us every part of the way and his love has the power to dissolve our fears. When we know that, we are in the Kingdom of Heaven, which in the Judaic tradition means enlightenment.

What about the word salvation? I grew up with rather narrow conditioning in which the word „salvation“ had overtones of fear of eternal punishment. As I understood it, it meant to be rescued from hell. When my experience no longer matched that concept, the word „salvation“ became meaningless. Then one day, wandering in a dictionary, I became aware that the root of the word, the Latin salve, branches two ways. It can mean to save or rescue; but it can also describe a healing balm, a salve, and the verb can mean – to anoint, to soothe, to heal, to connect, to make good, to make whole. Something in me connected with that. Jesus brings us to wholeness. It's what he did for Mary of Magdala.

A Jewish friend, a midrash scholar who lectures in Old Testament studies in a Presbyterian seminary, told me that Christians sometimes put the wrong interpretation on the phrase „Casting out seven demons.“ He says that in old Aramaic, this was an idiomatic phrase, a figure of speech. When we say someone „let the cat out of the bag“ or something is „as good as gold“ we don't mean that to be interpreted literally. Likewise, the old Aramaic saying „casting out seven demons“ was an allegorical. It meant, according to this man, spiritual training. Seven was the Holy number. „Casting out seven demons“ was the equivalent of a seven-step formation course that brought a person to holiness or wholeness. That's interesting, isn't it? It puts Mary Magdala in a different light.

Mind you, a word that has come back into my personal faith dictionary, is „sin.“ At one stage it was too heavy for me to carry and I tried substituting words like error, weakness, missing the mark, darkness, the Jungian shadow. But what the heck! Sin is an easy word. We all know what it means. And anyway, these days it's much lighter. I mean that literally. Life has taught me that there is always a seed of light in darkness, a point of transformation. I often need help to find that. For me the sacrament of reconciliation is greatly valued.

Let's talk about Jesus. In this celebration of faith that's where we begin and that's how we journey – through him, in him, with him – the Word made flesh who dwells among us.

When we talk about church history, we tend to bite it off in manageable chunks, going back to Vatican 11, Bishop Pompallier in New Zealand, the council of Trent or even the commissioning of Peter. But here and now, let's go directly back to the great fire on earth, Jesus Christ, who is not only the foundation of our faith but a continuing presence with us.

Incarnation gives us a linear sense of time. I don't think time is linear in the spiritual dimension. Jesus life is with us here and now and we celebrate it every day at Mass.

The Catholic teaching on the life of Jesus has many layers of wisdom. The Church is wiser than perhaps we know. Take, for example, the teaching of the virgin birth. I hear people outside the Church, in argument about the physical possibility or impossibility of the virgin birth. This kind of discussion is superficial and completely misses the deep metaphysical truth of this teaching. God becomes man receiving his masculine likeness from a woman, without male intervention. So, Jesus holds both sexes in balance. That for me is the deeper truth of the Church's teaching on the virgin birth and it says a lot to me about the completeness of Jesus.

In our faith, we always we come back to Jesus Christ. John Paul 11 said this many times. We need to be true to Christ. Pope Benedict XVI gives the same message and he urges us to read Scripture. Most

of us here are nourished by scripture in daily Mass readings. But reading the Gospels piecemeal is not a substitute for sitting down for an hour or two and journeying with Jesus through an entire Gospel. Those of you who have done this, will know how close you come to the writer's knowledge of Jesus, and how Jesus speaks to us through that. Preparation by reading the historical and cultural background of the Gospel, increases our understanding of the writer's intent, and that is part of important research. The Gospel itself is the vehicle of grace. It never fails to speak to the heart.

Occasionally I meet women who feel that they are neglected in the Gospels. I'm not sure how that concept has risen. In the cultural context of Jesus' life, a time when there was debate among the Parishes as to whether women had souls, Jesus' association with women was extraordinary - as was their commitment to him. Did you know that Jesus never rebukes a woman for lack of faith – and no woman ever lets him down? What does that say to women who feel misrepresented?

I've been reading the gospels for over 60 years and each time what I read contains something new – because I am in a new place in my life. I think that this is what both the psalmist and St Paul meant when they said that the Word of the Lord is alive and active. I also see a danger in fundamentalism that sees scripture not as guidance but as law etched in stone. If we take this kind of literal legalistic approach to the gospels, the words become frozen and they cease to nourish us at every stage of our journey.

The church gives us scripture for guidance as community, and scripture also directs us as individuals, when it is read with a listening heart. The church calls this 'lectio divina' but I didn't know that when I was young. When I read my Bible, certain words popped up. They almost became three-dimensional. Some verses brought tears and I didn't know why. Why would an 11-year-old cry each time she read this from St John gospel, chapter 3. „The wind bloweth where it listeth and thou hearest the sound thereof but knoweth not whence it cometh or whither it goeth. So it is of everyone who is born of the Spirit?“ I still feel strong emotion at those words, although I have no rational explanation for it. It's just mystery. When we read scripture, we don't look at law for other people. Scripture speaks to us for us. When we read with our beautiful hearts wide open to mystery, we discover not only the deeper meanings of scripture but also the deeper meanings of the Church's teaching about scripture.

Jesus calls us to follow him. Some of us would say that he is a very hard act to follow. Of course we all fail, and there are times when we feel diminished by our failure. Our dear hearts so hunger for goodness that we try to separate our light from our darkness. But we need to own our darkness. As I've mentioned, it is our growing point, the point of transformation. In our darkness there is always the seed of light ready to burst open into spiritual growth. Jesus understood that. He loved people

who were aware of their weakness. Not because he wanted to rescue them from their sins. I don't believe that. He loved them because they were real. They knew who they were. They knew their hunger for God.

When I was young, I was expected to read my Bible right through, every year. Most years I almost managed it – skipping some of the boring passages like the laws and the begat bits. I connected with the Psalms and the Gospels and loved Jesus the children's friend. But I wasn't too sure about God. My experience of Scripture was in the context of fear-filled fundamentalism that embraced a distorted view of Fall/Redemption theology. I saw God as a mean old man. He made people who weren't perfect and then punished them for being imperfect. I reasoned that if my mother left her children in the kitchen and told them not to touch the tin with the chocolate biscuits, that would be the first thing we would do. But for me, the story got worse. This God had his own son killed as a sacrifice. How crazy was that? I thought that if I were Jesus, I'd never speak to God again. Well, that's the thinking of a nine-year-old. Fortunately, we grow. I don't dismiss the wisdom of the story of The Fall. I just place a different interpretation on it. We know that this part of the book of Genesis was recorded during the Babylonian exile. The Hebrews were literally a fallen people. But apart from that, there is something atavistic in all of us, which connects with the story. Most of us have an ingrained memory of Paradise which makes itself manifest as a deep longing for perfection. It's as though we know what perfection is and we are striving to attain it. Yet nothing in this world is perfect. So where do we get that intuitive knowledge? I think that knowledge of perfection relates to our pre-incarnational state when our beautiful souls were at home with God. There is a lovely tradition from the mystics that we are all kissed by God before we begin our human journey. Children are born with the knowing of that kiss, but the knowing fades to a small, faint memory. However, it is still there within us and dimly we are aware of it – the kiss of God. It creates in us a great longing that nothing else can fill.

I believe that the concept of The Fall describes our souls pitched into this human struggle. At one time, psychologists described the Garden of Eden as the time of bliss in the womb and The Fall as our birth. But we now know that life in the womb is far from blissful and is often subject to trauma. So any deep awareness of perfection must surely come from a pre-womb state. With incarnation comes the struggle for survival and the development of the egoic nature. This must happen. If the ego develops in a healthy way, in maturity it will shrivel naturally and fall away to allow the blooming of our spiritual growth. Almost all of Jesus' teaching and certainly all that we know of his life, demonstrates this. Constantly, Jesus calls us away from our egocentric nature. He helps us to break down the walls of the small prison of self, to step out into the larger reality of God's love in creation. The Church has put emphasis on this teaching. Take up your cross and follow me. He who loves his life shall lose it. Except a grain of wheat dies it remain a single grain. Read superficially or prematurely, these statements have been misunderstood. Letting go of the me-first instincts of the ego,

is mature spirituality. It doesn't usually happen until mid-life. A 15th century monk put it this way: „Know thyself; tis half the path to God. Then lose thyself and the rest of the way is trod.“ That well describes the two stages of growth. We see in the gospels that while Jesus was teaching from second stage spiritual maturity, his disciples were still at 1st stage. I often think that if Jesus said anything that was way over the disciples' heads, it probably didn't get recorded. But that's okay. He still teaches us at every step of the journey.

We are aware that if a healthy ego is not allowed to develop when we are young, a mature spiritual state may not happen. People will not come to know and value themselves as spiritual beings. Such people will often take on external legalistic roles. They become church police, canon law police, and liturgical police. Every priest will know what I mean. But if we look past the role playing, we see in those people, a beautiful soul hungering for God. That is the human condition. And you know, the Church understands this. It is a very wide umbrella. It has a Christ-like view of the human struggle and it is there for everyone. Everyone's place of journey is sacred.

Jesus Christ, the great fire of God blazes at the centre of his Church and at the centre of our lives. May we never so focussed on peripheral detail that we lose sight of that light at the core of our being.

Let's now look at the spiritual history of the Church. I say spiritual history because I don't want to get into physical history – dates, popes, kingdoms, and wars. I don't know enough about that kind of Church history and the details are not a part of this celebration except in the ways that they have impacted on the Church's spiritual evolution. The church's history has not been so much black and white, as a full rainbow. It's a rich history and some of it we'd rather not own, but in looking at the spiritual growth we need to own it. I love one of the titles the Church gives herself. „A Church of Sinners.“ We can all identify with that. Another description I've heard is „The Church is a wise old grandmother with a lot of rubbish in her backyard.“ Outsiders tend to see rubbish. On the inside, we know the wisdom. But the rubbish is useful too. It teaches us to be more understanding about the rubbish in other people's backyards. And if it doesn't teach us that, it should.

There is an outside view that religion creates war. That's not true. People create war and make religion the excuse. This happens collectively or individually – and I can't point a finger at any one else unless I am absolutely sure that I am not creating war in thoughts and words in my own family and my environment. But the fact is, we tend to see other people's rubbish first. One of my favourite sayings comes from a man I regard as a saint, Mahatma Gandhi. He said, „When I see a man doing good, I seek to be like that man. When I see a man doing evil, I look to my own heart.“ We can learn a lot from the way we project our shadow on someone else. Projection is a growth tool, a mirror that God gives us through other people. It's important because God speaks to us most strongly, not through our

strengths, but our weakness, our shadow. Where the human aspect of the church has struggled with weakness, it has grown into understanding of the same struggles elsewhere, and whatever sin we see in humanity out there, we will find it in the wise old grandmother's back yard. Isn't that comforting? I find it so. It makes us real. It shapes in us the gifts of humility and compassion. If we reflect long enough on the rubbish in the backyard, we realise that actually, a lot of it is no longer rubbish. Most of it has broken down to become compost for new growth. It has become a part of our wisdom.

When talking about the spiritual history of the Church we must celebrate its evolution. I use the word evolution advisedly. We're not talking about Darwinian theory versus Creationism. That's superficial head argument. Rather we are talking about the development of spiritual consciousness in the world and the Church's place in this. Here is a quote from Benedictine John Main: „The Great conviction of the New Testament is that Jesus by giving us His Spirit has dramatically transformed the fabric of human consciousness. Our redemption by Jesus Christ has opened up for us levels of consciousness that can be described by St Paul only in terms of a totally new creation...“

Another quote, this time from Bede Griffiths: „It is the inner movement of the Spirit, immanent in nature, which brings about the evolution of matter and life into human consciousness, and the same Spirit, at work in Human consciousness, latent in everyone, is always at work leading to divine life.“

Retreat leader Margaret Silf gives practical evidence of the work of the Spirit. She says: „Personally I can look back over only half a century of this growing consciousness. But what I see convinces me that we are indeed in an accelerated process of change and growth. Fifty years ago, few people would have questioned the legitimacy of war as a means of resolving disputes. Today, millions protest against the use of military force. Fifty years ago, only a small minority of ecology enthusiasts were concerned with the well-being of the planet. Today is unacceptable *not* to be environmentally aware. Fifty years ago, social, gender and economic inequality and injustice were considered to be „the way things are.“ Today we rightly struggle for justice, especially on behalf of the weak and the marginalised, and the poorest countries in the world. So yes, I believe we are moving forward...“

Let's come back to the spiritual evolution of the church. At any stage, I'm sure that we've all believed that we have arrived. This is a very human assumption. It comes out of our collective egoic nature. We are there. We know it all. Any suggestion that the Church has a growing space, suggests imperfection and maybe we think we can't have that. But St Paul understood what was happening. He talked of all creation groaning as though in birthing pangs. As for the rest of us, we have only to look at the word of God in nature to see that the great imperative on this earth is growth. In nature, what is irrelevant falls away and what is full of life, increases. That is the way of growth. And so it is with the

Church. The Christ Centre of our faith is eternal and unchanging but it expands and changes us, as John Main points out, bringing us ever closer to God.

In the heart of our beautiful old church there is a great longing that has been expressed by popes, clergy, religious and laity throughout the ages. Teilhard de Chardin expresses it beautifully in these words. „The day will come when, after harnessing the ether, the winds, the tides, gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, human beings will have discovered fire.“

Now, we celebrate the Catholic Church in Aotearoa, the growth of ecumenism and justice, and lay spirituality as gift to the Church.

I'd like to begin this with two reflections – one for the season of Lent in Aotearoa and the other a Christmas piece. These show how our southern seasons give new meaning to traditional celebration,

In the Vineyard

This year will bring a good vintage.

We've had a cold winter, hot summer,
and fat bunches of dark pinot grapes
hang under the leaves, ready for picking.

No machines here. Not for this wine.

Each bunch, picked by hand, is laid
gently in the basket, a promise
of fine and exquisite taste.

Slowly we move along the rows
under the hot Marlborough sun,
Wind combs the dry yellow grass
on the Wither hills, and a lone hawk
circles high over our heads.

In this part of the world,
the grapes are picked in Lent,
a time when knowledge of the True Vine
is never far from the day's routine.
We are the branches, those ropes of wood
that hang between the eternal Vine

and the fruit ripe for harvest.
There is no separation.
The fruit from the eternal Vine,
gifted through its branches,
will go out to a thirsting world
bringing the fine and exquisite taste of God.

What feast!
What celebration!

This Christmas reflection celebrates an early summer nativity scene.

The Shepherds' Message.

Come all you shepherds and shearers.
Put down your blades.
Kick the fleece into a corner
and hurry on down to the birthing place.
Christ is with us.

It is dark right now in Bethlehem
but here the sun blazes in a fanfare of brass
and gulls float like scraps of paper
announcing to a blue, blue sea,
Christ is with us.

Not in a stable this time,
but a house-truck parked by the creek
under a snow of manuka blossom,
Mary, the baby, two cats and a dog
and Joseph making pancakes
over a little gas stove.

Walk quietly now, for this is holy time.
Kick your boots off at the step
and go in with open eyes
ready to be surprised by God.
Christ is with us.

You can see how the seasons of the Church fit our downunder seasons of the year.

We celebrate with gratitude, our „home“ church. Although this may seem disrespectful to Bishop Pompallier, I'm not going to talk about the historical development of the Catholic Church of Aotearoa. You will know the history better than I. Once more, I'm going to go under names, dates and places, and look at the spiritual life of our Church, the way God has worked with us in a short time.

True to its name, the Catholic Church is global and its teaching takes root in indigenous cultures.

I discovered this in 1978 in Easter Island. I was staying a few days with a local family and Saturday night was party night. The popular beverage on the island was *Pisco sour*, a very rough brandy served with lemon juice and Coca-Cola. By 4.00am I was very much the worse for wear and I couldn't understand why the rest of the family were not going to bed. I excused myself, and went to my room. No sooner had I gone to sleep than the mother of the house was hammering on my door. „Senora, la misa, la misa!“ I was dimly aware that a bell was ringing in the little church across the road. It was 5.45am. They were going to mass. I shouted back, „Soy protestante!“ but that made no difference. To my hostess it was unthinkable that even a protestant should miss Mass. She went on knocking at the door until I was dressed, and as I staggered out, she presented me with a scarf to tie around my head. The morning was still dark. Streams of sleepy families converged on the small concrete church which was well lit and filled with lively South American music. 6.00am was a folk Mass. I went in with the family, knelt with them and, in my grumpy, reluctant, drunken state, I came home. I discovered in that place, the Presence I had always known.

Well, Easter Island was my first stop on a backpacking tour of South America, and everywhere I went, I sat in on a Mass. Each country was different and yet the experience was the same. It seemed to me that the Mass expressed the culture of the country while at its heart was an eternal, unchanging truth. So began my path into the Church. Now, I share that story with you because many of you will have had similar experiences when travelling. The Mass is that same mixture of culture and eternal truth. You know that you are a visitor in an Australian, Cook Island, French, American, Polish, Irish Church and also, spiritually, you are home. In Aotearoa, the Catholic faith came with mainly Irish and French influences. We added to that Polish, Dutch, Italian, Vietnamese, Korean, a number of transplanted cultures and now we are looking for own identity with our indigenous culture - worshipping under Southern Skies in Aotearoa New Zealand. Probably the strongest cultural influence comes from Ireland. Many of us here have a little bit of the Irish in us and if we lay aside the questionable benefits of Jansenism, then we see a beautiful Celtic spirituality that readily forms a hybrid with Maori

spirituality to give us a culture of the land. Our Irish background is also useful in understanding the indigenous people of New Zealand. What happened in Northern Ireland, happened here. We need to remember that when we are listening to the grievance of Maori.

I learned much of Maori spirituality from a beautiful Catholic kaiarahi friend Parehauraki Huirama. She taught me to walk lightly on the earth, and respect it. To perform each action with prayer. To be grateful to the bountiful earth. To give back to the earth or sea when you take something from it – returning the first fish caught, when making kete to place the leftover flax at the base of the parent flax bush. All the teachings in Maori ecology have spiritual significance. She also showed me how to look past divisive judgemental attitudes to see the beauty in every one of God's children. There is a Buddhist saying that when the pupil is ready the teacher will arrive. I was ready to connect in a deeper way with the Church in this land, and Parehauraki was my teacher.

St Columbanus put this understanding in a different way. He wrote: „Understand creation if you would understand the Creator.“

New Zealand doesn't carry a lot of historical baggage. Our land has not been trodden down by thousands of years of civilisation. It is ripe with natural beauty that speaks eloquently of our Creator. Is Nature important to our faith? It was to Jesus. Jesus taught in the temple, but did he pray there? Not that we know of. When he wanted to be with his Father, he went by himself into the wilderness or up a mountain. Consider all his parables that were drawn from nature, all his lessons for living that came from earth imagery. Creation spoke to him of the Creator.

I'm not suggesting for a moment that prayer in church is not valuable. The Eucharist is at the heart of our faith, and prayer in front of the Blessed Sacrament infuses us with the light of that „peace that passes all understanding.“ What I am saying is that we should also be aware of the word of God in our natural surroundings.

The Church has come a long way from the days when it was a bit paranoid about God in nature. We believed we saw people worshipping animals or a trees or mountains and we called it pantheism and retreated so far from nature that we imaged God instead, in the product of people's minds. We still tend to make idols out of words and ideas. But gradually, we became aware of the Creator in creation. God spoke to St Francis through nature. Hildegard of Bingen. Teilhard de Chardin. God speaks to us all through nature if we have the eyes to see, the ears to hear. But we are still nervous of heresy. So we needed to invent a new word that made it okay to see God in nature and that word is pantheism. Isn't that funny? Sometimes, I imagine the air shaking with the gentle laughter of the Holy Spirit.

In Judaic mysticism there is a saying that we see and hear what we are meant to see and here. In Aotearoa, with nature all around us, we are constantly aware of the ways that God speaks to us through our surroundings. Here are a few personal insights. I look at the teaching of daylight and darkness. Night and day are not separate conditions. They belong together and one surely turns into the other as part of a natural rhythm. What about the parable of the seasons? Few people like the season in our lives we can call winter, a time of loss and emptiness. But winter is not a time of dormancy, it is preparation for spring growth. What can we take from nature's patterns of growth? I look at my apple trees. When they were young they needed a lot of feeding plus staking and tying to protect them from strong winds. When they grew to maturity, the same stakes and ties that supported them, could now impede their growth. If the ties are not loosened they can actually damage the tree, or even kill it. How does that speak to me about the stages of spiritual growth? We walk in the bush, admiring natural beauty. Then we notice that actually, nothing is perfect. Growth and decay are the two movements of life on our planet, and what has died is providing nutrients for new life. I sometimes look at windswept waves and am aware that a storm at sea is superficial. If the water is shallow, the bottom will be churned up. If the water is deep, the bed is undisturbed by what is happening on the surface. What can I learn from that?

Once, on a retreat, I asked retreatants to walk in a beautiful garden and find some metaphor from nature that was meaningful to them. One came back and said she had noticed that God had made grape vines grow with tendrils that looked just like corkscrews!

We are greatly blessed to live in a fresh, beautiful land where God speaks to our senses. I see the Church's pro-life teachings extending to all life, cherishing the earth as Jesus cherished it. The more we love and respect even the smallest of growing things, the closer we come to God.

A huge area of recent growth in the church comes from its loving heart and its attitude to fellow Christians. When I became a Catholic twenty five years ago, there seemed to be a high wall between our house and the other houses in the Christian „village.“ We seemed to keep ourselves to ourselves and no doubt that was for a number of reasons, many of them connected to fear. Then we discovered that we did not lose our special identity by visiting a neighbouring house. Sometimes, both the neighbours and ourselves were surprised by how much we had in common. When the high wall disappeared, the neighbouring churches learned more about us. Some discovered that we didn't worship idols and Opus Dei wasn't the Mafia. And we found we could be part of a bigger Christian community and still be truly us.

A rich fruit of the ecumenical movement, has been the gift of Catholic spiritual traditions to our neighbours. Mysticism which was often suspect out there, and labelled „superstition“ has now gone

mainstream. Contemplative prayer for many non-Catholic Christians is daily practice. Formation workshops, retreats, days of reflection are happening everywhere. An Anglican bishop told me that the young people at his cathedral had discovered lectio divina and couldn't get enough of it.

About twenty years ago, when I was first asked to facilitate retreats, we would be a mixture of Anglicans and Catholics. Now I would not be able to guess where people have come from but that is often revealed over a few days – Catholics, Baptists, and Anglicans. Presbyterian, Ba'hai, Quaker, Methodist, Salvation Army, Brethren, and Buddhist.

Non-Catholic churches are reading Catholic writers – Henri Nowen, Thomas Merton, Macrina Werdekher, Joyce Rupp and many more.

If we go back to that image of the Church as a wise old grandmother, we see she may have been initially a little timid about opening her door, but now the gifts of her wisdom are pouring out and all of it is good news.

For me, the flow of gifts is not all one way. I look over the rooftops of our Christian village and see the villages of other faiths. I've rejoiced when John Paul II and now Pope Benedict XVI, have acknowledged and shown respect for other religions.

From my Jewish friends, midrash scholars, I am able to put Jesus in a cultural context. I'm also able to share religious jokes. You know, I think that Catholics and Jews are the only people who can joke about their religions. In India, I am inspired by the way Hindus and Sikhs talk about God as naturally and as often as we talk about the weather. I've learned aspects of prayer discipline from Buddhist teachings, and I've often thought that if I prayed five times a day like my Muslim friends, I'd be more present to God. Near Christmas, I open Christmas cards sent to me by friends who are Jewish, Muslim and Hindu, and that to me is a sign of the generosity of God in people of other religions.

Understanding other religions in no way threatens our own faith. Rather, it confirms it. It makes us realise that religion is not something invented by humans for political reasons. The hunger for God is a condition of the human race and we respond to it according to our culture. Jesus said, „In my father's house there are many mansions.“ I believe he was telling us something about the God who is much bigger than our small images of God.

I know that some people think that religion leads us to God. I see it the other way around. God leads us to religion. It is our response to the divine spark within us that yearns for its Creator. While we rejoice in our faith, I think we diminish the celebration if we imagine that our rejoicing is greater than Hindu or Muslim rejoicing.

Interfaith dialogue amongst Catholic, Muslim and Jewish leaders is now well established. I think that the church is a little more cautious about Hinduism, seeing it as polytheistic. That's a misunderstanding. It isn't. It's monotheistic and the so-called household Gods are what we might call saints. Which reminds us of the story of a Buddhist trying to decode a Christian stained glass window, and understanding the Trinity as a dove, a lamb and an old man with a beard.

In both ecumenical and interfaith outreach, we have grown greatly in the last two decades – thanks to the Church, our wise old grandmother.

The Church has always been strong on justice issues, and here too, we've seen a broadening in response to the Gospels. We can celebrate the fact that we practice what we preach, while acknowledging that we still have some growing space. I don't intend to list that which is as yet unfulfilled except to say that God hasn't finished with us yet.

(I'm reminded of a cartoon I once saw. Two men were standing in the fires of hell and one was saying to the other, „Unfortunately, mine were all sins of omission.“)

Let's look briefly at justice issues and see what we have to celebrate. I am proud to belong to a church that can look beyond its own needs to act for the greater good of all humanity. I'm proud of the Catholics who have supported the Treaty of Waitangi and Maori land issues. I'm proud of our lovely Bishops who recognise that Maori is the indigenous language of this land and it has no home elsewhere – unlike English or French or Polish or Gaelic. I applaud the Church for its work amongst marginalised people, especially new migrants, many of them Muslim refugees. This is where interfaith dialogue steps out into interfaith action. Justice hasn't been just about the Church protecting Catholic social values. It's about working for all people according to their need. It's about the care of the helpless and the homeless. It's about the protection of the planet.

Over the past few years, the Church globally, has been badly shaken by sex scandals, especially the priestly abuse of children. People have been in denial, or else so hurt and angry, that they have not seen the hand of God in this. Remember that light in the darkness! It is always there if we look for it. We feel deeply for the victims, but I feel even more so for the priests concerned. These men give themselves in celibacy to God, but you know, it's very hard to go against Nature. What we walk away from in life, will pursue us. I don't think any of these priests thought they were „abusing“ young people. They were simply acting out their own sexual age. I'm told that this scandal has always been with the church, but effectively hidden. We can thank God that it has been brought into the open. Yes, we were unhappy about the media attention. We thought that the Church was being victimised.

But we can learn from that too. We tend to preach Catholic sexual morality to non-Catholics, so we deserve to be accused of failing our own standards. That is a very good lesson to take on board. We can thank God for it and learn from it.

I believe that we need to look at shadows with the clear, unafraid eyes of our hearts, for always, there is the seed of light in the darkness, the point of transformation, the rubbish breaking down to form compost for new growth. The scandals, the fall off of vocations, are indirectly creating in our New Zealand Church, a movement too new to have a name but something is happening to us, and with it, fresh growth. I'm talking about the lay initiative in its new and wider parameter, from trained lay leadership to the ministerial roles that have been with us for a while. The Church has always recognised that its vocations come from laity, and now it accepts that there is something called „lay spirituality“ which is a gift to consecrated priests and religious just as they are gift to us. Lay spirituality is the spirituality of marriage and new life, the spirituality of family, the spirituality of the marketplace, the spirituality of God's beautiful world. It is not separate from the consecrated vocations but complementary to them, and it moves the Church into a larger place, one that is at the heart of the Gospels. We are all part of the body of Christ.

Another area of growth in the Church has been the recognition that women can do more than arrange flowers and clean brass. Most of us would agree totally with John Paul 11 when he said that men and women are equal but different. It seems a simplistic statement but it needs to be given serious attention. It seems to me that for a long time, our consecrated menfolk, especially priests, have been seriously disadvantaged. Men and women learn from each other. For centuries women have learned from men, but the structures have been such that men have not been able to learn from women. The patriarchal system is not something that evolved from power. It evolved from deficiency.

What are those differences? This is only a generalisation and there are always exceptions, but most men steer towards independence. Independence is important and the ego supports competition and ambition. The movement is vertical. Women on the other hand, steer towards relationship and connection, and social growth tends to be horizontal. When the sexes fail to learn from each other, there tends to be separation, ignorance and fear, a right brain/left brain dichotomy with a high gender fence in between.

When we do learn from each other we come to a God-given wholeness in ourselves. If we like to put this in a diagram, the vertical and horizontal lines form the cross of the risen Christ. This is yet another area of healthy growth in our Church.

Before I finish with a few words of blessing for our future, I'd like to say something about love and fear. Those words in the first letter of John chapter 4, carve themselves on our hearts: „There is no fear in love but perfect love casts out all fear.“ This truth has been echoed by mystics down the ages and comes into the present in the words of Australian poet and mystic Michael Leunig. „There are only two emotions: love and fear. There are only two outcomes: love and fear.“

When I was sixteen or seventeen, I wrote in the back of my Bible, „Satan, thy name is ignorance and all thy works are fear.“ I don't know why I wrote that and the words would have come not from a very naïve teenager but from the voice of guidance within me. But that statement still holds truth for my journey.

We come into this world equipped with a strong instinct for survival. This is our basic, primal instinct. When we are young, it functions as the growing ego and it is protected by fear. Fear has its uses. It keeps us safe. It makes us cautious crossing a road or a river. It stops us from walking over the edge of a cliff. But at about 8 or 9, children start pushing back the boundaries of fear. They want to read scary books, risk new manoeuvres on a bike or skateboard, climb trees, turn the clothesline into a flying fox. Loving parents need to relax the safety rules just a little and at the same time, help the child to build a healthy ego. First stage Catholic teaching helps the child understand that he or she is a special creation of God and much loved by his or her creator. Then, as life experience and spiritual development reach maturity, there comes the beginning of a reversal at a deeper level, the need to go against the „me first“ instinct of the ego, to let go of fear, and to trust the love that God has poured into us. This is our personal journey to the larger place.

As I mentioned before, when I was still a child, I didn't relate to Fall/Redemption theology. Of course, I didn't know it was called that. I just felt there was something deeply wrong with what I was being taught. Somebody else tempted me to sin and somebody else died to make up for that. I felt like a little fish between two strong currents. Where was my responsibility in all this?

Evil is a reality. But I don't find it helpful to project my evil on some archetypal enemy. I am responsible for my own evil. I know that my angry, negative, judgmental thoughts create negative energy, and when that energy is multiplied by a crowd and released in hate-filled words and actions, the effect can be truly described as demonic. Always, the cause is fear and that fear exists because of ignorance.

I mention this because we all know that the way forward is the way of love, and to take that from theory into practice, we need to deal with negative thoughts. We don't do that by beating up on ourselves or others, but by looking prayerfully at negativity and locating the fear behind it.

My heart leans of its own accord towards Pope Benedict XVI. I see the light of God in his writings. His writings show us that he has transcended ego and is in a larger place. He's not concerned with superficial detail and negativity, and always he comes back to the Christ centre. Have you noticed how often he uses the word „love?“

The way of love is the way of acceptance, of seeing the pure soul in every human being, whatever their life situation. Every soul is pure. Every soul is of God.

Those of you who have not read Pope Benedict's Deus Caritas Est, have heart-warming enjoyment before you. I'm one of those people who expect to read encyclicals out of duty rather than pleasure; but this was a surprise. It wasn't just written about love, it was written with love. It should be compulsory reading for us all.

How do I see the future of the Church in Aotearoa?

I see continued growth in all areas. I'd like to see Te Reo, the indigenous language of Aotearoa, taught as part of all formation courses because to know the language is to know the spirituality of the land. I see the flowering of administrative partnerships, men and women working together without that gender fence. I see Catholic family and social values lived without fear - and without preaching to non-Catholics. The world outside will be influenced by what we do, not what we say. I see us showing increased warmth and respect for other religions. They love God as much as we do. And I see the spiritual gifts of the Catholic Church shared generously with our Christian cousins in this green and growing country. And always, I see Jesus in our midst saying, „Behold, I am with you always, even unto the end of time.“

May we finish this talk, by asking God for a blessing?

Holy One, Lover of our Souls,

Bless this beautiful country and all your children in it. May we walk lightly on the land, leaving it unmarked for future generations.

Bless your Church as it continues to establish its roots in this soil. May we celebrate and pray in our own South Pacific voices.

Bless our lovely Christ-centred Bishops. We thank you that they have found freedom in truth, strength in humility and true leadership in service. May we support them every way we can.

Bless us here today. Fill our beautiful warm hearts with the light of your love, so that we can laugh at our fears and step out into the larger place you have prepared for us.

Ki te ingoa o te matua, o te tamaiti, me te wairua tapu, Amene.

Joy Cowley