

# Joy - the most infallible sign of the presence of God.

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The French Jesuit priest and cosmologist - Teilhard de Chardin once said, "Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God!" Think about that for a moment - think of the most joy-filled people in your life - think of the most peaceful - think of those who have that sparkle in the eye! Now ask yourself - are they loving? Are they kind? Are they giving? I suspect that they are. I have my share of favourite Scripture quotes - but towards the top of that list is 1 John 4:7 - "God is love!" Where love is - where forgiveness is - where peace is - there you will find joy - there you will encounter God.

The Indian Jesuit - Fr Anthony D'Mello told the story of a young Canadian woman who knocked on the door of a convent in Toronto. One of the Sisters answered the door and invited her in. "Can you help me experience God?" she asked. The Sister asked her to follow her into the convent library. She pointed out several wonderful books by great spiritual masters. She recommended several. But the young woman was persistent, "No Sister, thanks for these but can you help me experience God?" "Oh," the Sister replied - I think you need to speak to Fr O'Reilly at the presbytery - it is only three doors down the street. The young lady took her leave and proceeded to knock on the presbytery door. Fr O'Reilly welcomed her in and told her the Mass times - but again, like with the Sister, the young lady asked, "Father, can you help me experience God please?" The priest pointed her to several wonderful books on his shelves and even - gifted her with a rosary. The young lady - politely thanked the priest for his time and took her leave. Frustrated - but still searching - she found herself in India some months later - and knocked on the door of an Ashram - was invited in to sit at the feet of the master - who over the coming days and weeks and months - led her to a depth of the spirit - she had longed for and in doing so - knew she had come home.

Many years ago I taught at St Laurence's College - not far from here - up on the Mater Hill - I taught a young man in my Year 11 Religious Education class; his name was Danny Holt. Danny was not your typical private school boy - for a start he loved his Rugby League - and we played Rugby Union - he was from a hard working family who struggled to pay his fees. His other great love was surfing. One day I found myself waxing lyrically about God - about Luke's Gospel and Luke's attempts to address themes around Jesus and women, Jesus and prayer, Jesus and the poor - I thought I was doing a great job until I looked out to see that only 5 of the class of 30 were actually awake. One of them was Danny. He put up his hand. "Yes, Danny" - the response - appearing to wake up several others - for rarely did anyone ask a question - "Brother, sorry mate - you are a good man - but I really don't buy into all this God stuff!" "Ok Danny - what do

you 'buy into?'" "Well Brother, on the weekends - most Saturdays or a Sunday I go on down to the Gold Coast - I find myself the most secluded beach I can - somewhere near D'Bar - and sometime around 5 am - I paddle out to the breakers. I am not sure if there is a God - but with the sun coming up - the beginnings of tips of light on the waves, the cool water, the silence - the awe of the sunrise - I am alone and it is magic. It is just beautiful. The waves are perfect - before the wind of the day has played its games with them. Maybe there is another surfer close by - but we probably don't talk much - sometimes I'll share the wave with a dolphin - Wow - I don't know about God - but in the early morning - with its blues and dark blues, its reds and golds - in the silence - it is just perfect. If there is a God - he is right there with me."

In my forty or more years of youth ministry I have discovered that our wonderful youth don't all that often buy into 'the God stuff'. Most Catholic schools that I know might - at best - have 5% of their students actively involved with a faith community - perhaps 1% might claim to have a personal relationship with a personal God.

Too often we try to catechize - before we have evangelized. Pope Francis is fond of challenging us - to discover "A culture of Encounter!" Sadly - and I can only speak of my own Catholic faith tradition - in most cases - we have lost the wonderful art of encounter. Sadly - too few in my tradition have encountered the Divine - Mystery - Love - Jesus - and they certainly don't expect to in the Sunday liturgy - that one hour in the week that is to be endured, tolerated and on the rare occasions - valued and enjoyed. We are there - motivated by a mixture of guilt, routine and seeking the weekly spiritual aspirin that may get me inside the Pearly gates. How sad!!

Perhaps for our Twenty-First Century world we have put the goal posts in the wrong place? Perhaps we are attempting to play cricket with a rugby ball? We are looking for the 'God talk', the overtly religious response, the presence in the youth group, the altar server. Have we - through our language and our lack of empowering of our youth to engage in theological reflection / spiritual reflection - limited the possibility of any experience of 'God' and simply served up dry, meaningless ritual and rites far from their lived experience?

In the midst of my youth ministry I have discovered that there are hundreds of sacred moments in the life of our young people - but because we have selectively labelled some moments sacred and others - most of them - secular - in the midst of their experiencing of these moments - that we label secular - they develop the heart set that the 'it' - that they are experiencing is NOT religious or spiritual - it is not 'sacred' - because it does not fit into our narrow limits of 'Church stuff' - and therefore psychologically they see it and life as secular and 'us' as some weird mob that are associated only with a very narrow, very limited group of heart experiences.

### **In-points**

When I talk about an 'in' point - I am talking about a space, a time, an event, a moment - when something 'more' enters in, where the young person discovers 'more' - goes beyond to

something mysterious and good and loving. The 'in' point captures your breath - the 'in' point silences your racing egoic mind - the 'in' point takes you to another plane - sometimes of insight, often silence - but always 'love' in its thousand faces. At times I have used the term 'spirit pointers' - it is the same encounter with 'more'. The inpoint is a space of 'heart readiness' to go deeper, to engage in one's heart questions, to find meaning and to experience the transcendent.

I would like to name some of the 'in-points' that I have discovered as I have tried to walk with our young people - but as I do it - I encourage you to tap into your own wisdom - your own experience in ministry to the in-points you have encountered. In my work with youth I have discovered that;

**Experience in Nature** - the awe of a sunrise - the sunset. I can remember climbing a mountain in the Border Ranges National Park with a group of Year 9 students on their annual camp - we climbed in the dark to be at the summit at sunrise. As the sun rose - there was silence - there was awe - no words were said - I looked around and the boys "were in a zone". When asked to reflect on the days of their annual outdoor education camp - many of them identified that as the most special moment. Why? For Danny Holt - I am absolutely convinced that nature was one of his key in-points - to meaning - to life lived to the full.

Many of the in-points for our youth can be experienced in the context of a youth retreat or school retreat. But within this context - the in-point is often linked to a significant life event - the sharing of story or significant rituals and symbols.

**Experience of community - belonging** - often at the end of the day on a retreat - I will gather the group - bring them in close - do a rugby scrum hug - and then pray the blessing from the Book of Numbers (Numbers 6: 24). It is amazing how often the students will refer to it - even asking for that type of closure.

**Good ritual** - I can remember gathering a group of students around the altar - bringing them in close - and the priest walked around and asked each to hold the host in the palm of the hand - then he slowly broke the large host and slowly prayed - this is our God broken for you and me - for rich and poor - for the outcast and the sinner - for the lost and the alone - for the refugee and the migrant - for the dreamer and the poet - for the lover and the searcher ....and on he went - and then we consumed the host at the same time - there was a sense of awe - a sense of wonder - of more.

**Stillness – silence - darkness** - often at the very end of a day on a retreat - I will simply have the group form a large circle - I will have a 'Christ' candle / love candle in the middle of the room - and after some simple sharing about their day - I will invite them to sit in silence for some time - and when ready to come forward - with no words and light a votive candle or a floating candle to honour their day - then to reform the circle - I then play a sacred song - could be Eva Cassidy

“You take my breath away” - and before the song begins I will simply say, “When the song finishes you may move off to supper or stay here in the darkness and silence” - often you will have up to half of the group sitting there in silence half an hour later. What is going on? Why would they? Again - often in the evaluations - they will speak of how sacred those times are.

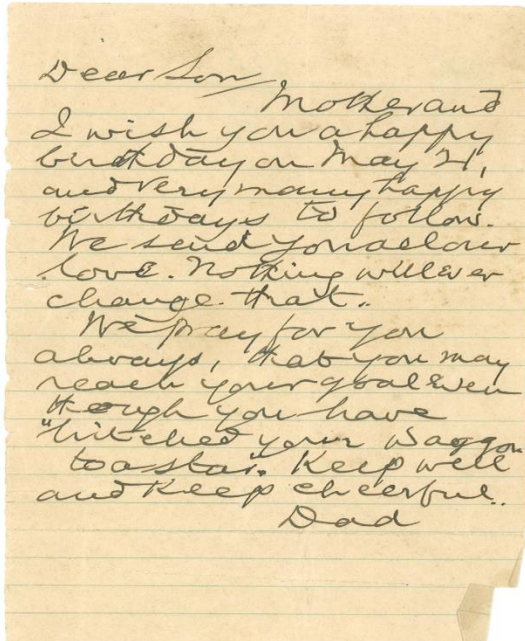
**Key life experiences - acceptance** - I was - only in June of this year - present at a Year 12 Retreat down in Victoria - where a transgender young man opened his affirmation bag on the last morning of the retreat and he cried and cried - as he read the many notes of affirmation from his peers - accepting him - for who he was!

**Unconditional love** - again - hundreds of times now - I have had the privilege of being on a ‘Kairos Retreat’ where young men and women receive that bag of letters from parents and loved ones - and there is hardly a dry eye in the room - as they read of the love that those who know them best have for them. On one occasion - I was there when the young man on retreat had lost his mother to cancer the year before. Knowing she was dying - and knowing he would probably do a Kairos retreat the following year - she had video taped a message of love - totally unconditional love and dreaming for him - it was like Moses with the Burning bush - take off your shoes - for this is holy ground.

In 2010 an old boy of mine - Grant Kirby was killed in Afghanistan - a member of the Australian Army there. When they brought his body back to base - in his pocket - among the few possession they are allowed to carry with them - was the Kairos letter written to him years before by his grandfather!

**Ladder language / concepts** – to go deeper - often when working with youth I will simply introduce simple language and rituals - one would be the use of the Hindi greeting - Namaste. Now I would not introduce this in the first minute of a retreat - but as the trust builds up - as the relationships deepen - I will introduce it, inviting the students to “let the heart do the work”. This simple ritual and word - can take many forms - a simple standing before the other in silence - a simple turning inward to the whole group and honouring etc. Recently I was working with a group of our young Christian Brothers in Kenya - and at the end of the day I asked them to simply sit - with their hands on their laps - eyes closed - and when they were ready to - and became aware of - to lift one hand from the lap to their chest and “hold” someone who has loved them into life - and hold them to their heart - for about a minute. When my chimes rang - to do the same with their other hand - but this time hold someone they knew who was hurting - hold them to themselves - then to bring the hands together - into the prayer pose - and then slowly open them and hold them before love, before God, before the Universe. After this I invited them to slowly come forward to light a votive candle to ritualise this. They loved it - it had meaning for them! In some weird and wonderful way - that simple ritual - that sacred moment took them deeper - beyond.

One element that many 'in-points' share in common is that of story. I always say - in ministry - when in doubt - share story. Story is neither right nor wrong - better or best - it just is. But when one breaks open story - the heart listens. You can feel the energy in a room heighten - or deepen - the moment a story is shared. Story whether in the form of a 'witness' - a letter from a loved one - the recall of a significant life event - a movie clip - or the deep heart sharing of friends around table - is truly a sacred time. Young people love story, it has a credibility about it - they engage with it - they respond to it. Luke had it so right when he had the disciples reflect at the Emmaus Inn - "Did not our hearts burn within us ....!"



As youth ministers part of our sacred story is to know the story - tell the story - and then in our communities - mysteriously - without even knowing it is happening - we become the story teller. Jesus was a story teller. Who in your community are the story tellers? How do you invite your youth into times of sacred story sharing?

There are a myriad of in-points - any doorway to the heart. Others might be;

**Key life experiences – pain / loss - death of a loved one - forgiveness - Mantras**

**Critical thinking – cause and effect / person and issue - theological reflection – Lectio Divina - awareness of dualism - Physical challenge when**

**coupled with other 'in-points' - Ritual – bold symbols - movement - Song / music / poetry - Credible theology / ideology - Significant mentor - Reflection upon experience - awe - Meditation - involvement in Justice issues - affirmation - challenge - being empowered - being trusted .....!**

**Awe** is a most powerful in-point. That moment where words fail us. But sadly too few people - upon experiencing awe do not see it as a spiritual moment - the fault (if there is one) is not theirs - the fault lays with a faith community that through word and action has told them that the spiritual and the sacred are to be found within the four walls of a Church or linked to someone wearing a stole around their necks - and so - sadly they see that moment of awe as special - but secular.

I can remember having a group of Year 8's on a retreat on time - and I got them to grab their sleeping bags - and we went out and lay on the oval at the outdoor ed centre. The stars above were just magnificent - after I had quietened them down - took care of the boy who insisted on farting - I then invited them to look - really look - then slowly I read Psalm 139 - then some of

Isaiah 49 - then left them in silence. There was a 'wow' - a sense of 'awe' - of young people caught up in the magnificence of God's creation.

### **Service**

But one of the most powerful of in-points is that of service. There is something special - something sacred in the encounter with 'the other' - our brother or sister on life's journey through service. Mother Teresa in her Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance speech talked about "Christ in the distress and the disguise of the poor!" But it is not just any service that can be an in-point - in fact I believe much service or community engagement or service learning - can actually do harm. It can reinforce stereotypes, it can entrap those being 'served' into dependency, it can demean and rob the other of their dignity - in my "saving" of the other I can be simply feeding my ego - and the Lord only knows our world has too much of the egoic mind running rampant!

But when we engage in service - when that service is;

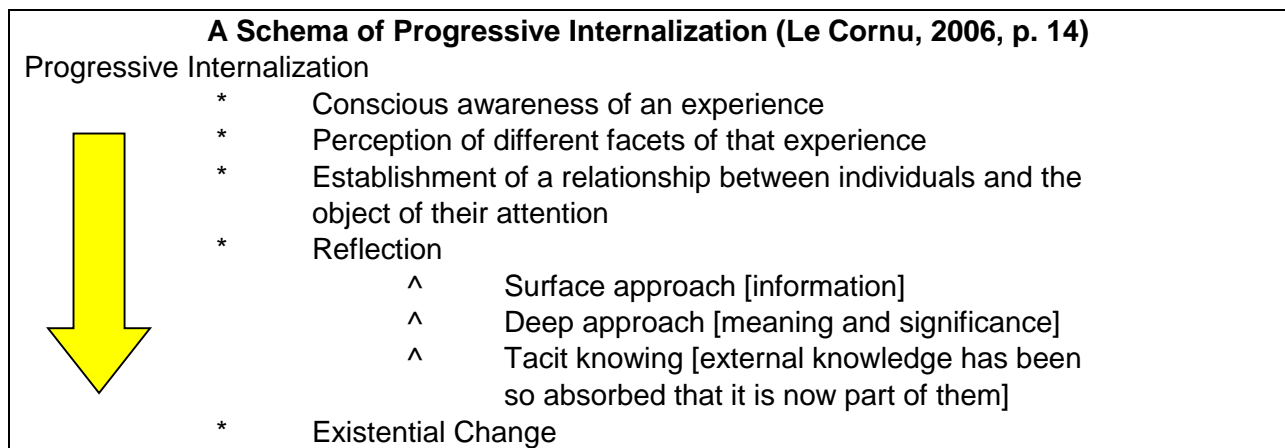
- in direct relationship with the other
- when we reflect on our experience
- when we are skilled in critical thinking / social analysis - asking 'why'
- when the experience is assisted by the proactive engagement of mentors
- but most of all - when the experience is wrapped in a ideology / theology of meaning - it can be the most profound of experiences.

One of the key factors that ensures service - can truly be a gateway to deeper meaning - to encounter with 'the other' - with love - with awe and more is to wrap it - to frame it with a **credible theology** - language. When we talk about - coming as guest to the other - the guest comes slowly, gently, openly, respectfully to the gift of the other - it is sacred ground - when we bow low and Namaste (with eyes, and ears and touch) - when in that sacred space we choose - make a deliberate choice to be deeply present to the other - to be completely there for the other - with our presence saying "You are beautiful, you are lovable, you are wonderful - just as you are!" This guest and this presence will open our heart and eyes and ears in compassion - we will wrap our arms around the other - not necessarily physically - and all of this will lead to an extraordinary sense of freedom - that 'more' of the in-point.

I have seen this hundreds of times. I have had the honour of working with people who call the streets home and of working with refugees and asylum seekers - but more importantly - working with young people with these communities ....in all of these and more - when we wrap the experience - when we 'frame' it (that is the psychological term for what we are doing) - we are 're-storying it' and when we do so - guest and presence - become ladders to ever deeper meaning.

At first this may be surface meaning. Based on the work of an English theologian - Alison Le Cornu - the young people will quickly go beyond surface to a deeper level of meaning. The response to working with the homeless will go from the surface - "Oh they are nice people, they smile and are friendly" to "I really feel at home there - they are like a family - they welcome and accept us." Now - I have come to probably the most important thing I want to say this afternoon. When the deeper meaning making through reflection on experience, through critical thinking and engagement with the core ideology / theology become their owned pattern of engagement - the meaning making 'door opens' to a deeper level of meaning making - we call this the tacit level of meaning.

Psychologically - when your mind has experienced welcome and then experienced welcome again and then experienced welcome again - welcome becomes 'expected' - becomes part of the meaning landscape. If you continue to reflect on experience - then the door way will open up and you see 'more' you see and experience things you did not see nor experience before. The young person may now say, "Wow - I have been going out on the street van now for 5 months - and I used to think I was helping them - then last week, Joe asked me how my footy team had gone - and there I was in the middle of the botanical gardens chatting away to Joe - like old friends - and it hit me - he was caring for me - he was interested in me - it was a real friendship." Once the young person has reflected on their experience at the deeper level - and this has become a pattern - then other meanings such as powerlessness, reciprocity, able to sit in silence, shared brokenness and more begin to be revealed.

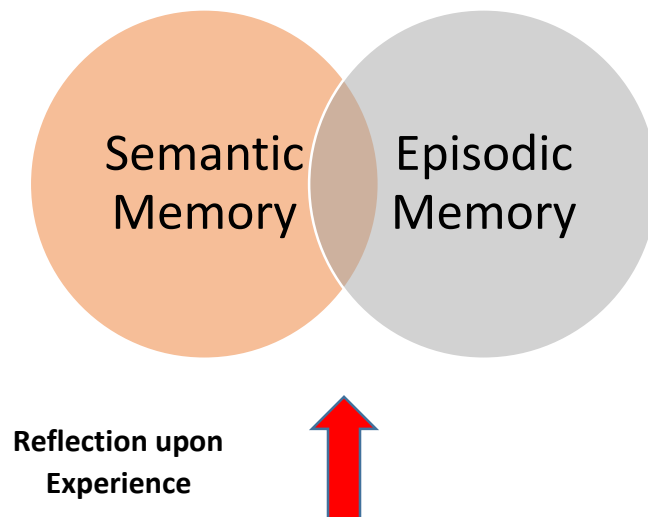


Once the young person engaged in service has journeyed down the meaning making road and their reflection upon experience has become part of who they are - part of their worldview - then tacit - now a pattern will deepen even further to existential change. You could liken this to Fowler's stages of faith ....the young person begins to see wider and deeper connections - they are able to sit with people in silence - they sense deep within them their shared humanity with the brokenness of the other - they sense the brokenness of humanity - and in the midst of such poverty and pain - they see hope and joy and peace and dignity - where so many others only

see 'bum' or 'tramp'. They go away from those encounters and truly - unlike the all too often flippantly expressed "It was a life changing experience!" Well - for these young men - it is.

I want to share the story of James with you. James was one of our 16 year olds working as a volunteer on Eddie's Van; our hospitality van that would go out five mornings and two nights a week to share and build community with the homeless. I just happened to be the Team Captain for James' team.

One morning we were at the sound shell of the Garden's Point Botanical Gardens with our breakfast service - coffee, tea - and a sausage and egg roll. Off to the side was an elderly man sitting on his own. After a few minutes I noticed James go over and sit on the ground next to the old man - who was on a bench. I half noticed this but did not think much about it. I noticed they were not talking. Later on I discovered that James sat for some time and then gently asked the old man did he want a coffee? "Yes" came the reply. James got the coffee and sat in silence again. Two weeks later - same place - same elderly man - same James - the sit, the silence, the coffee - then I noticed James getting him a roll. This kept on going for about a month - until one morning I looked over and saw James and "Sid" deep in conversation - with the occasional laugh. James recounted that he deliberately chose to come to Sid as guest - he knew this was his turf - his home. He wanted to come slowly, gently, respectfully to that sacred place. He made the deliberate choice to not talk - to slowly build up trust. Finally after four encounters - James said, "Hi, I'm James!" and held out his hand. "I'm Sid!"



What James was doing was testing out 'guest'. We learn - when concepts / information / data / experiences - are introduced into our Semantic memory. When introduced - they have not been learnt. When guest was introduced to James and his class - guest was the person who came to the family home on a Saturday night for the BBQ. So we break open guest - how we come to the encounter, the sacred ground of the other - slowly, respectfully, gently, open to learn, open to be encountered and more. Then we 'test' out that concept in the field - in the world of the



Episodic memory - and then - as we reflect upon our experience - the concept grows and grows and eventually is 'owned' - and becomes part of our Semantic memory - part of our landscape of life.

One of the great things about in-points and especially about service - is that we can develop in our youth concepts and values that will be truly transformational and lead to existential change - Paul on the way to Damascus.

But it can go further and be even more long lasting - part of their life's journey. When - for example a 10 year old visits a nursing home and they are invited to sit with the elderly and engage them in conversation 'as a guest' - it stretches their meaning making. Guest means sitting with the elderly as they may repeat a story - as they forget where they were in a story - perhaps the smell of urine - perhaps having to sit in silence with someone with Alzheimer's - and then later on as they hear their friends recall great sharing of story with other nursing home people with stories from the Vietnam war and more. All of this builds guest as a concept - as sacred ground - IF REFLECTED upon.

Then imagine that same young person playing netball or soccer with a recently arrived refugee when they are 12 or 13 and then working on a soup van with the homeless when 15 and then being a buddy to a child with cerebral palsy on a Sony Camp when 17. Each time - if guest is introduced - if it is nuanced with the help of mentors - people like yourselves - if the young person reflects on their experience - then 'guest' gains a **psycho-cognitive strength**. It grows legs - it become elastic - it can stretch and transform to meet any situation.

This can happen with any concept; story, dignity, presence ....cause and effect!

This **psycho-cognitive strength** can have profound implications for us here today. The former Catholic Archbishop of Brisbane - John Bathersby would often lament his inability to help the youth of his Archdiocese to 'fall in love' with and meet Jesus the way he had. He was passionate about people knowing Jesus the way he felt he did. The engagement with these concepts - regularly and deeply and the deliberate planning for in-point times and possibilities lay the ground for transformation - for encounter - for more.

If a young person has engaged in an 'in-point' - has had a significant life experience - meaning experience - and if it has been reflected upon - then when that person engages with another 'in-point' they go to deeper levels of meaning making faster. There would appear to be an inner language of the heart. It was St John of the Cross who once said, "The language that God hears best is the silent language of love!" So just as a concept can gain a psycho-cognitive strength when experienced in varying situations - so too can the meaning making heart with a variety of heart experiences.

So imagine a young person engages with nature regularly as a child - experiences wonder - is moved by awe - and senses a beauty and power beyond themselves - then that same child experiences wonderful times of community and belonging - then they engage with or experience great ritual and symbol and at a later time engages deeply with service - and does so assisted by user friendly times of reflection then inner scaffolds of meaning are built. Each time a youth engages with an in-point - they move to a deeper level of meaning making. This process - in itself begins to go into the pattern that Le Cornu describes - they become deeper - and then if reflected upon - if reflection becomes part of their life mind and heart map - they begin to develop tacit patterns of meaning making.

By the time the youth is reaching young adulthood - these patterns aided by deliberately engaged with skills such as theological reflection (the pastoral cycle) or social analysis as well as the maturity process as they engage with and develop their civic identity - lead them to begin to expect and look for deeper levels of meaning. They begin to see the patterns inherent in the meaning making - but not sensed earlier. As they 'join the dots' - the common energy they (these experiences) share - that of love and peace and belonging and joy - lead them to see the face of love inherent in all heart experiences. When they are ready - when the heart has been nurtured and the soil of meaning tilled - they will name the God beyond all names.

Of course - we adults need to hold this whole process lightly. Don't forget the age old key question when walking with our wonderful youth - "Whose needs are getting met here?" We need to be aware and free of any egoic need to be the centre of the whole process. We will need to be sensitive to the timing of it all - young people will engage when they are ready - I sometimes think when Jesus told the parable of the wise and foolish virgins - he was talking about working with adolescents. Any of you who are parents - will know that beautiful tango of sitting with, waiting for - that sacred moment when they - our children - want to talk - and I mean really talk. So we plan for - are ready to create the space for the in-point journey - but do so lightly and ready to respond to each particular sacred journey which is each wonderful young person. On that journey they long for our presence and our fidelity!

But it is an exciting journey. You really know you are alive when you walk with, sit with, dream with our wonderful young people. But ultimately - Paul had it right when he prayed:

*"Glory be to Him whose power working within us can achieve infinitely more than we can ask for or even imagine, Glory be to Him in the Church and in Christ Jesus! Amen!"*

Paul knew - what each of us knows - that ultimately He will do the work - yes, perhaps needing our fragile human hands - but it is HIS work! If we can know that - we - and they - will experience: joy!