

Transcript from Fr Paddy Boyle

In 2013 at World Youth Day in Brazil when Pope Francis arrived in Rio De Janeiro, he made a speech, a short speech in which he said:

‘Listen! Young people are the window through which the future enters the world.

They are the window, and so they present us with great challenges. Our generation must show that it can rise to the **promise** found in each young person when we know how to give them space.

This means that we have to create the material and spiritual conditions for their full development, to give them a solid basis on which to build their lives; to guarantee their safety and their education to be everything they can be; to pass on to them lasting values that make life worth living; to give them a transcendent horizon for their thirst for authentic happiness and their creativity for the good; to give them the legacy of a world - worthy of human life; and to awaken in them their greatest potential as builders of their own destiny, sharing responsibility for the future of everyone. If we can do all this today, we anticipate the future that enters the world through the window of the young.’ (Pope Francis, Rio de Janeiro, Monday, 22 July 2013)

The Pope’s speech is both inspirational and aspirational at all kinds of levels. It is the context, and it configures the environment **in** which and **from** which, we repeatedly state we want our children and our young people to experience the world, the church and themselves as they journey through life.

Pope Francis is, of course, coming from a faith-based understanding and perception of the world, of life and of every human being who has and who ever shall live. Faith implies a human response, but the act of faith presupposes that God is already drawing that person to Himself. After the profession of faith during the Baptism ceremony we proclaim, ***‘this is the faith of the Church, we are proud to profess it.’***

Faith, the faith of the church, is, of course, informed and nourished by the scriptures and by theology and theology is, as Sr. Anselm would have it, **‘Faith seeking understanding’**.

Faith, according to St. Anselm is not replaced by understanding or reason but rather complimented and nourished by it. is a volitional state: it is love of God and a drive to act as God wishes (cf. Thomas Williams, Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2000).

Other definitions of Theology include.

Theology is: ‘the study of the nature of God and religious belief’.

St. Aquinas: Theology is taught by God, teaches God, and leads to God.

These are just some of the definitions of what Theology is and what it does. It enhances our faith; it should deepen our faith. It should always lead to God. Theology is simply the attempt to understand God.

On that point Pope Francis has some interesting insight concerning children:

‘God has no difficulty in being understood by children and children have no trouble in understanding God. It is not by chance that in the Gospels Jesus speaks beautiful and strong words about the little ones. This term indicates all persons who depend on the help of others, particularly children. Children, therefore, are a treasure for humanity and for the Church – because they remind us of the necessary conditions for entering into the kingdom of God – that we must not consider ourselves self-sufficient, but in need of help, of love, and of forgiveness.’ (Pope Francis, general audience, 18 March 2015)

If we were to choose a text on which we might reflect on all the above it might well be Gen: 1:26

Then God said, **“Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness”**.

This is without doubt an incredibly exalted understanding and indeed vision of the human being, of the human person. These seminal creation texts, we find in Genesis, go on to describe an idyllic relationship between God and his creation, a relationship based on love, pure love, effective love, God does, God is a moral God who is, who acts, who does. In the creation narrative God shows Himself to be the provider, the protector of the human being.

The environment into which he places the human being, the garden of Eden, is, as the Pope Francis would say, a place worthy of human life, where everything is provided to enable the human person to grow, to develop and to reach his/her greatest potential.

And today God’s mission, the mission of the Church, as it has always been, as shown to us by Jesus Christ is one of love and service.

Even after 2,000 years of Christianity, it is still and will always be the imperative - incumbent on each generation and central to our faith – to act, in the image and likeness of God, following the example of His Son, Christ Jesus, and to provide, to protect, to pass on lasting values, love, truth, justice, peace, , to create and preserve an environment worthy of the beauty and dignity of the child and that imperative is as urgent now as ever it was.

Jesus, before he ascended to His Father gathers the eleven Apostles and he tells them to **go**, to **baptise**, to **teach** everything, - **everything**, I have commanded you. (Matt. 28: 16 – 20)

Everything that Jesus commanded us to do can be summed up in the two great commandments ‘Love God and your neighbour as yourself’ ‘As long as you did this to one of these little ones you did it to me.’ (Matt. 25:40)

This has always been at the core of the mission of the Church, to love God and love your neighbour - to provide, to protect, to teach, to pass on, to safeguard, to nourish, to enhance what is passed on. At the end of the profession of the faith during the Baptism ceremony the priest sums up what has been said by saying, ‘this is our faith, the faith of the Church, we are proud to profess it.’

The scriptures are used copiously through the Baptism Ceremony and as well as that - our understanding of Baptism, its action and the beneficial consequences, for the Child, it’s

family and the Faith Community, is to be found in the teachings of St. Paul, the teaching of the Church and in Sacramental Theology – all of which imply a clear and direct responsibility for the family, the church, the local faith community - to safeguard and nourish this child, and every child, this nascent faith, this child of God, this brother/sister of Jesus Christ – this heir to the kingdom of heaven. That is the church's life-long project.

While the universal and local churches continue to develop and promote informed and effective policies and procedures in relation to safeguarding and protecting children and vulnerable adults – ensuring that places of worship and all church activities are safe - It is also engaged in an ongoing process of articulating the theological and faith-based foundations of safeguarding principles.

In formulating a theology of safeguarding the church continues learn from the Behavioural Sciences, for example the various departments of Psychology.

It also has a rich trove of resources in the various branches of Theology – dogmatic theology, moral theology, Biblical theology, pastoral theology, sacramental and liturgical theology – Pope Francis is a leading voice in the world on Ecology, the safeguarding and preservation of the planet and of all who share its gifts. We can also delve deeply into the social teachings of the Church.

All these rich resources speak of the nature of God and God's relationship with the human person – with the child - and of how we should, in our day-to-day dealings with one another, live out those values of Love, of Truth, of Justice, of Peace, values that make life worth living - all of it is good news.

This leads us back to the one basic premise – every child is a treasure and faith is a gift and as Jesus emphasises again and again throughout the gospels that, a child-like vulnerability, a child-like trust, is of the essence of the kingdom.

Every child has the right to live their life, their childhood, free from abuse and exploitation. Safeguarding is of the very nature of the church – Mother Church- the Church is a mother in her roles of nourishing and protecting the believer, particularly the little ones, her children and the vulnerable.

'Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed. Each of us is loved. Each of us is necessary.' (Benedict XVI)

'Let us pray that the brightness of God's love may enfold all children. Let us ask God to help us do our part so that the dignity of children may be respected.'

(Cf. HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI, Saint Peter's Basilica, Sunday, 24 December 2006, et alia)