

Formation for Discipleship: a letter from Fr Martin to the young men and women of the parish

Young brothers and sisters in Christ

I am writing directly to you but also indirectly to your parents and, indeed, the whole parish family. I've been thinking about this letter for some time and have kept putting it off. But even though it's difficult to write someone a personal note when you don't know them and they don't know you, now is the time to do it and trust in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

When I was on holiday during the Summer, I read these words: "I invite all Christians everywhere at this very moment to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ or at least an openness to letting him encounter them." The words really touched my heart. They challenged the ways I have been thinking and prompted me to think about new, fresher ways by which we might encounter Jesus. These words were written by Pope Francis. If you're interested, you can read where they come from: search *Evangelium Vitae* at www.vatican.va

Being sealed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit confirms and strengthens an already existing relationship with Jesus Christ. Many of you already enjoy that relationship. Since the day of your baptism when the seed of glory was planted in your souls and supported by your families, your relationship with Jesus has been developing. Sometimes, in small, almost invisible ways. Sometimes, in dramatic ways. But now that you have grown into a young adult, Jesus offers you the fullness of His Spirit in the sacrament of confirmation to further nourish your relationship with Him and embolden you to live as a young adult disciple of Christ. This calling will ennoble your life and your youthful

witness to the love and mercy of Christ will renew the faith of the whole parish community and spill out into the world.

But I'm also aware that some of you might have a weaker, damaged or poor relationship with Jesus. Maybe you're no longer sure what that relationship is meant to be? Perhaps the multiple voices of the influencers and youtubers; the noise and distractions of the world around you have drowned out the voice of Jesus quietly calling you to Himself? Maybe it's that you have learnt "things" about Jesus but you have not come to know and love him personally? You understand Jesus as an idea, but not as a friend. Or maybe, it's something else...

But what a lot of people who think deeply about these things say is that faith can no longer be taken for granted. When I was your age faith was absorbed and supported by the family, school and society but that is no longer the case. We cannot assume, for example, that because someone goes to a Catholic school that they are practising their faith and desire to have a relationship with Jesus. At the same time, there are very loud voices in our society telling us that we do not need to entrust our lives to God but that we can manufacture ourselves and answer all our questions, needs and desires without listening to His desire for our happiness. We are all influenced to some extent by these voices and the white noise of our culture. It takes real strength to stand against the tide and profess, "I am a Catholic, a follower of Jesus Christ. I am proud to be so."

There's something else I want to mention. I think it is almost impossible for a young person in our culture to remain close to Christ without the support of others. You need the support of other young Christians. You need the prayerful support of the wise and the holy. You need the support of your parish family. The trouble is that the

elders in a parish especially the priest can be so concerned about providing catechetical programmes and sacramental courses that we can sometimes overlook the fundamental question: do our young men and women know Jesus, the Son of the Living God, as their friend and Saviour?

All this is a long way of letting you know that the discipleship formation for the sacrament of Confirmation will not begin until September 2024 and for those of you entering Year 12 (16–17-year-olds). Why are we making these changes?

There will no longer be a Confirmation programme. Instead, we want to offer you six creative encounters with Jesus as part of your formation as disciples. After these “encounters”, you will be better equipped to make a decision about receiving the sacrament of confirmation and continuing your journey as disciples.

If we are going to make these “encounters” worthwhile and meaningful, we need time to gather together a team of leaders who will shape these “encounters”. By pausing this formation, we are taking the time to create experiences that will stir in you a greater love for Jesus. We thank you for your patience and understanding.

An essential part of your formation will be helping you to recognise Christ in the weakest and most vulnerable. As Pope Francis reminds us

“...we are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 198). Faith teaches us that every poor person is a son or daughter of God and that Christ is

present in them. “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (*Mt 25:40*).”

By raising the age when this formation begins you will be better able to respond to that conversion of heart that Jesus calls each one of you to experience. Now that there are no AS levels, you will be freer to reflect on your relationship and to do so in a more grown-up way. Pope Francis says to all of us:

"Today each one of us should take a bit of time and think: Jesus, you are within me. I want to encounter you each day. You are a person, not an idea. You are a companion on the journey, not a programme. You are love that resolves so many problems. You are the starting point of evangelization. You, Jesus, are the source of joy."

For those of you who have drifted away from Jesus but “at least have an openness to letting him encounter them”. Great. Even the smallest opening proves that you have not slammed the doors of your heart to Jesus. The ember of desire for Him still glows within you. Do not be afraid to allow the Holy Spirit to blow on that ember and for it to ignite into a flame. We look forward to you joining us for this future formation.

To those of you who are practising their faith, I encourage you to continue the journey, knowing Jesus is by your side. He is the source of true and authentic happiness. Your energy, hopes and freshness rub off on the rest of the parish family and helps us to stay young in Christ. We thank you for your witness. We thank you for being part of our family. But, most importantly, you are in our prayers.

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