

STUDENTS' THEOLOGICAL PERCEPTIONS

A Case Study

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Introduction

An enrichment programme for students was established a number of years ago at Our Lady of Lebanon College. In 2013 staff was again asked to nominate students to participate in the programme. The students who accepted being part of the enrichment programme were asked to choose a topic and a staff mentor. This paper describes the research undertaken by an enrichment group consisting of Year 10 students that chose to further their knowledge in the area of 'Religion'. It presents their findings and their theological analysis of the data and concludes with a theological commentary from the teacher mentor.

Getting a Working Theme Together

The first step involved discussions and throwing around ideas. From this the enrichment group chose to conduct student surveys on topics of personal interest. Topics that emerged included perceptions on: church attendance; suffering; free will; the body; the Eucharist; and the Pope. The enrichment students were encouraged to write questions that were clear and unambiguous, including both open and closed-ended questions, to elicit information. The number of questions per topic was to fall in the 2-4 range in order to elicit enough information to study but not too much that would overwhelm the students.

The enrichment students were given a month's time-frame to interview their peers.

It was emphasised that all who partook in the surveys had to be volunteers, covering Years 7-12 and of both genders, in order to get a cross section of the College and young people's perceptions on religious issues.

The next stage of gathering the data involved sifting through the information and noting what common responses emerged and whether any responses stood out. The enrichment students had to infer their conclusions from the responses given.

THE FINDINGS—STUDENTS' INTERPRETATION

Church Attendance

Students were asked whether they attended church regularly accompanied by a parent. The results suggested that as age increased, the likelihood of students attending church decreased. However a minority of students still undertook their Christian obligations, irrespective of their parents. Findings suggest lack of transportation, parental support and increasing workloads affect church attendance.

The second question focussed on participation levels of youth in parish activities. The survey data revealed the involvement of youth in their parish activities was somewhat lacking. The mature age students were likely to attend parish activities but their participation levels were average. The argument for these results centred around the busyness of mod-

ern day lifestyles.

Analysis of Suffering

The following question was asked in the analysis of suffering: What do you understand by suffering? The most common response was that suffering is a part of life and that it involved pain, both physical and emotional. This idea of suffering reflected the individual's upbringing and attitude towards life and death. Other individual responses included suffering is the cross that one carries due to sin and that one inflicts suffering upon oneself.

The second question put forward was: Is suffering and pain the same thing? The most common answer was that suffering and pain are the same. However other students indicated that suffering and pain are not the same and justified this by saying you can feel pain without suffering yet you can suffer without feeling pain. Furthermore suffering induces a more spiritual heartfelt response, while pain is a temporary physical and emotional state of instability.

The third question in this area was: How do you deal with your suffering? Many students dealt with their suffering through prayer. A significant number turned to aspects of music, exercising, meditation, talking to someone or keeping it bottled up.

Finally the question was asked: Why do we suffer? Responses suggested it is an inevitable part of life, reflective of sin. Others stated that suffering is unavoidable; a spiritual purification for our transgressions; or that God sends suffering to test our faith and love.

The survey data indicated students are familiar with suffering. Yet, in saying so, the students interviewed did not voice the opinion that suffering can have positive implications such as one gains insight into one's faith and spirituality.

Free Will

Students were asked if they had any issues

that may be 'grey' areas in terms of Church teachings. Generally, there were no concerns. Most students took on board the view of the Church on a wide range of issues, aside from the much publicised matter of homosexuality.

Older students (Years 9-12) were more likely to express concern in the area of homosexuality than younger students (Years 7-8). According to the survey, most students take the approach of consulting a priest to discuss the issue of homosexuality, as it was seen by them as a trustworthy Catholic approach. Notably, many older students additionally research into the issue for themselves, seeking the Magisterium of the Church as well as scriptures to inform their conscience, as opposed to the younger students who were less likely to exercise their free will during the decision-making process.

The understanding of free will is seen as the ability to make our own individual choices. It is a God-given role that allows us to accept or dissent from a certain belief. It is a privilege that allows for one's control over one's own life, reflecting the Christian belief and intrinsic principles of freedom. So the question was put forth: How significant is free will in your decision-making when regarding church teachings? The most prevalent response was to educate yourself on the issue and weigh out all the consequences. By exercising your free will, you choose what decision to make in accordance with your conscience, research and church teachings. The younger students who had limited knowledge on their faith were more likely to take the Church's approach, while older students were more open to studying the issue and making their own learned decisions.

Human Body

This survey was conducted to identify the students' perspective on the importance of the human body. The majority of students answered that they should treat their bodies with

respect. Many students said they achieved this by maintaining a healthy diet and exercising regularly and that by treating their bodies with respect, they were able to respect others. This response is in agreement with the Christian belief that one's body should be respected, supported by Paul's teachings. The junior students were more likely to say that their bodies were not sacred, as they believed they were no more important than any other creature that God created.

Students surveyed in regards to the second question about sex before marriage unanimously agreed that sex before marriage was wrong. They believed that people should withhold from sexual acts because engaging in these prior to marriage is not an expression of love but a way of achieving personal pleasure. These responses were in conformity with the teachings of the Catholic Church. The majority of students recognised their bodies as sacred because they believed that each human is made 'in the image and likeness of God.' They believed that their bodies were a gift and created for a purpose.

Understanding of the Eucharist

Sixty-five per cent of the students surveyed revealed that they received the Eucharist at least once a week, especially at Sunday church services. Twenty five per cent of the students surveyed revealed they partake of the sacrament of the Eucharist every two weeks and ten per cent of the students revealed that they received the Eucharist only at School Masses.

The majority of students believed that Eucharist was the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ and the reason for their statement was because Jesus said he was 'the Bread of Life.' Students in Years 7 and 8 recognised the Eucharist as a symbolic representation of Jesus Christ. They did not believe that Jesus is present in the Eucharist, due to their limited knowledge.

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Opinions on the Pope

According to the survey results, many believe that the new Pope, Francis, should be assisting with social justice and equality, giving his blessing to the poor, sick and homeless. The Pope should be finding new laws and rules of the Catholic Church, ways to bring Catholics back to faith, uniting all Christians under faith, encouraging Christians to follow and know more about their faith and to be an inspiring role model.

All students surveyed agreed that Pope Francis promotes the values of Christianity through his care for others and respect for each person no matter their status. Many believe that Pope Francis chose his name through the influence of St Francis and the emphasis on humility.

Many of the opinions regarding Pope Francis suggest he has a unique person that can change the world, guided by divine inspiration and was a prominent and beloved figure for Catholics.

STUDENTS' SUMMARY

The enrichment programme allowed the group to further their knowledge in the area of 'Religion.' Through the study of various aspects including church attendance, suffering, free will, the human body, the Eucharist and opinions on the Pope, the surveyed students provided findings that expressed the perceptions of youth within today's society.

Even though survey numbers were limited, the questions were broad and responses were varied. In order to truly find, you must first search, and through these surveys, topics of interest were explored and knowledge was gained by the enrichment students.

A Take on Student Theology

The evaluation of the data provided by responses to the surveys may be considered quite brief and simple. The enrichment stu-

dents interpreted the findings along the lines of their own understanding and experience, and this at times contributed towards a more conservative approach to the interpretation of data.

If one was to interpret the survey responses as a theologian of many years' experience, one would identify here a school cohort that is quite 'religious' and faithful to Catholic teaching compared to the majority of young Australians as revealed in findings by Phillip Hughes in *Putting Life Together: Findings from Australian Youth Spirituality Research* (2007) and Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton and Ruth Webber in *The Spirit of Generation Y. Young People's spirituality in a changing Australia* (2007). Research and reflection informs one's interpretation of data, yet does this knowledge also colour one's interpretation?

For the enrichment students it was a given that students accept, often without question, the teachings of the Church, or see the priest as the final authority on issues, or acknowledge that suffering is sent by God to purify one, *etc.* For these young people the practice of questioning and challenging and stepping out of boundaries was neither viewed as part of their religious practice nor understanding.

The *status quo* was generally accepted, although there were emerging indications that religion is not always black and white. The issue of homosexuality and attendance at Mass indicates that young people move towards personal decision making in regards to religious positions, but this can be a gradual process.

A seasoned theologian has critique as part of one's tools, and would likely have honed in on the responses of students, concluding that the continued religious maintenance and practices by this school cohort may be due to the ethno-religious background that includes a tight-knit Maronite community that holds

tightly to its culture and faith.

Yet on the other hand, young people, unlike seasoned theologians, are not commonly dissidents and their theological outlook often begins conservative. Their religious interest, if pursued, will over time become exploratory and possibly more inclusive. Yet this will depend on their mentors, their teaching and formation, and the ability to discern from the prolific and varied information that is presented to them.

Conclusion

Sitting in the background observing and listening to these enrichment students unravel the survey findings, lively debate ensued. There were issues that polarised the group, such as the 'necessity' of attending Sunday Mass, while other issues elicited opinions leading to further discernment.

What emerged overall from this programme included findings which revealed to the enrichment students, a College student body that in general still practices the Maronite Catholic faith. It also revealed that there are querying minds. The unexpected responses opened and challenged the minds of the enrichment students to a wider view of how 'Religion' is understood and practiced. This can become a starting point for a more open and questioning stance on their behalf in regards to how they tend to view 'Religion.'

Through the process of leading them to elicit responses from other young people and analysing data in a meaningful way, the enrichment students were confronted with perceptions that did not necessarily conform to their 'religious' views and so the practice of theological discernment began. If the practice of delving into unfamiliar religious terrain of their peers excited them, we may be on the way to forming open-minded and thoughtful theologians.