

## Introduction

There is a difference between 'churchianity' and Christianity'. I'm sure you'd instantly know what that means. We have to remember the church is made up of people, so it should not surprise us that it does not always reflect the best parts of the Christian message. As we know, the church at our local parish level is struggling to manage with structures that are outdated and collapsing. The most obvious is an aged male clerical priesthood.

One of the aims of the PFGM is to build parish community. Some people seem to forget or are unaware of this. It is important to remember it, because being parish based, a Family Group can play an important part in providing people with a positive church experience in these critical times.

There is a risk that people might develop a lop sided spirituality. There is more to Christianity than loving people. This is too simplistic. Jesus spoke about 'the kingdom of God'. Jesus dreamed of a universal fellowship drawn together by the compassionate loving God.

In past eras, and still today, some people have thought that Christian faith consisted in 'private morality' which consisted of private prayer and 'saving my soul'. Others have thought that prayer and church attending are irrelevant, and that one only has 'to love'. As we will see, this is one of four pillars of Christian faith. It has to be sustained and supported by the other three pillars.

A PFG is a small Christian community and much of what Christian faith calls for can be seen and experienced in a Family Group, which should be exciting for believers. However, because many people are attracted to Family Groups because of what they perceive is its non religious nature, they fail to see the potential there is in Family Group life. That is why some others, say they haven't just joined a Family group, they have found a new way of life.

There is nothing wrong in us having different levels of understanding and appreciation. Our motto is to be 'all inclusive'. We don't want people feeling afraid that they are being asked to be religious, or that we are trying to do that to Passionist Family Groups.. At the same time, we might be able explain that we don't need to fear spirituality. It is alive in different ways within each of us.

The Family Groups are underpinned by a particular spirituality; that of the Passionists. It is a spirituality based on the love of God and experienced in a down to earth way in everyday life, particularly in the dark and difficult times. This Passionist spirituality enriches Family Group life and is critical to the deeper aims and goals.

In our formation days this year we want to discuss some strategies for bringing out the deeper dimension of our aims and goals in an individual Family Group so that we can help others live their faith in a more practical way and support them in their faith journey.

## **What's happened to spirituality?**

It is proposed that in England one thousand years ago, most people never travelled more than fifteen kilometres from their place of birth. The roads were poor, the hospitality inns were run down and means of travel were limited. Their lives were tied up with nearby neighbours. This reflection quickly reminds us how different modern life is from every previous generation that has lived on earth. In 1893 the first private motor vehicle was unveiled in Sydney and the Wright brothers had just flown their plane one hundred metres. Just one hundred years later, a spacecraft has landed on Mars and begun collecting and photographing rocks and soil matter and sending the photos back to earth.

Most people who have lived have done so without electricity, and heating or cooling a house has been limited to primitive methods. Methods of communication a century ago were restricted to the a postal service, as the telephone was not yet in use, and radio, television or the internet invented. Ninety percent of the then Christian world lived in rural communities largely unaware of events in other towns, and certainly unaware of life in other countries. There was little social change, although the effects of the industrial revolution had begun to affect the way many people lived. Authority figures were respected and those with literacy skills were appreciated for their competence. The church was a binding factor in the values and ethics of new Christian countries such as Australia and New Zealand

Sociologists speak today of three 'worlds': developed (industrial and information dominated), developing, and under-developed (basic agrarian). Many people within the cultures that have become 'developed' are experiencing social alienation and isolation. Young family members who leave their villages or small towns seeking further education or employment in large cities become lost in the maze of people and the lure of fast living and they suffer a lack of true belonging. Often family members left behind have rare contact with their children and even rarer contact with grandchildren. In large cities people's relationships are impersonal, they are often anonymous cut off from people they once knew and devoid of meaningful relationships.

In the past, each generation had an unspoken 'pact'. They knew they owed their living space to the previous generation. People planted trees knowing another generation would harvest them. This 'pact' also applied to religion. Parents involved children in the religious rites they had experienced themselves. They may not always have seen the purpose, but they did not break the 'pact'. Often this meant that Christian faith was reduced to exterior rites and customs while the inner side was barren or never properly developed. This system began to change some centuries ago, but it has only recently become obvious. Two significant influences in this change have been privatisation and consumerism.

Privatisation has its roots in the weakening of faith as a binding force in society. The religious wars of the Reformation brought society to the verge of disaster. An idea arose that society could be established, not on religious principle, but on human nature and reason. As this has taken root more and more with advances in scientific discovery, the importance of religion has been lessened and increasingly come to be considered a private matter. In agrarian society a person's life is not segmented. The extended family is a productive and vibrant community, living, working and learning together. Recreation and basic schooling are done in the local village where the family lives. No one can be anonymous because the community is relatively small.

Modern society, by contrast, is widely segmented (work, media, culture, education, religion, economy, transport, health care, sports, entertainment etc). These different areas are independent sub-systems. The Church is one segment among others (not the integrating factor it once was). Meaning, values and norms that used to come through particular religious traditions are shifting. Religion is taking different shape in different social contexts. In some Islamic countries, religion is still the integrating factor of society, governing civil practice, while other countries have a constitution that guarantees pluralism and respect, but views religion as a private affair.

This change has liberated people from many social constraints and moral fault-finding that often occurs in close knit communities, especially those tied to religious standards. While many rejoice in the freedom of choice that has come from liberating principles with regard to marriage, divorce, contraception and abortion, there is not the same certainty that these principles are as highly valued when considering issues such as euthanasia, stem cell research, cloning and genetically modified food. More significantly though, many people feel disjointed and do not belong. They are constantly challenged to engage and to participate but without sustaining relationships. Many feel a need to withdraw, fearing they will be swallowed by the many diverse and competing demands. Many choose to live alone or are left alone.

This development has been quickened by our consumer society which first became pronounced in the 1960's. The values that began to prevail are contrary to the old value system. Now the greatest values are prosperity, success, autonomy and personal development. An essential part of any daily news report is the financial state of affairs. A serious event anywhere on the planet sends stock exchanges into an immediate frenzy in nearly every country. In the face of tragedy, the first consideration for many is not compassion for their neighbour, but concern for how this will affect prosperity.

Many Christians feel a gap between the Church's proclamation and their own lived experience, their views, attitudes and general behaviour. The resulting tension is difficult and many reduce it by distancing themselves from the church. Social mobility which began in the 1960's made this easier. One reason people do not go to church in the same numbers, is because economic development has allowed people to have their own motor vehicles, providing them with extensive leisure opportunities.

In Australia there were no motor vehicles in 1900. By 1962 there were two million vehicles and the number had increased to more than thirteen million in 2003. In Australia and New Zealand 65% of residents own a car. In a developing country like Korea, there were only thirty thousand privately owned motor vehicles in 1970. This had grown to five million by 1995 and to fifteen million by 2003!

General mobility has made it easier to escape the pressure to conform to religious laws that were 'stifling'. Today it is easier than in the past, to be non religious. In earlier centuries non believers went to church because it was 'norm to conform'. Previously, it was easily observable if one did not attend church in a small town. People today often feel lonely if they are church goers. This is especially true of the young, who find themselves a minority, often having to fend off challenges from their peers. Secular groups form to create support and community, whereas this was once a natural reality in local villages or towns and found expression in the local church. These realities greatly affect churches today. Past pastoral strategies aimed at fostering a culture that pressured people to conform to particular religious conduct. This was easy to do when people's lives were inter-connected. Now since the focus is so much on the individual, rather than the local community, this is difficult.

The temptation is to join society's push to appeal only to the individual and his or her needs, but Christian faith has social consequences. Convinced or committed believers are a minority now, and around them are circles of less convinced believers, together with genuine seekers and doubters. It is important that this small group of believers be encouraged, supported and inspired to live a faith that is vitally connected with their everyday life. Unless it is, it is not really faith. There are many who still ignore social responsibility or try to separate this from their personal relationship with God. This is religion, but not faith. The Passionist Family Group Movement gives us a vehicle for making faith real.

In the past thirty years, churches in most European countries have steadily declined in numbers and in France, Germany, Belgium and Holland it has been an 'accelerated reversal'. Australia and New Zealand have both experienced a steady decline in church attendance and a greying of those who worship on Sundays. The disappearance of Christian traditions handed down from one generation to the next, has not happened 'overnight'. It is the end point of an evolution. If present and future generations focus increasingly on the 'now', with little appreciation of the gift of their ancestors and even less on the needs of their descendents, the passing on of religious tradition will be minimal. The traditions that are passed on need to be open to new world views so as to be relevant, while at the same time emphasising that mystery is at the heart of true faith.

The changes since the 1960's in everyday living have been dramatic. This is particularly true of the past decade. In recent years we have seen the collapse of the Berlin wall and of communism, the unification of Europe, the move by China into the political and economic world and so much more. We've been introduced to globalisation and consumerism as never before, driven by instant communication around the world. Technology continues to threaten human choices, even as it provides so many new products and advances in every field of endeavour. People's ideas about marriage, morality, authority, leisure and religion have become far more subjective. Simple issues such as Sunday trading and 'festive greetings' at Christmas, challenge the notion that we are a 'Christian country'.

Within the church, authority and credibility have been eroded, and a younger generation express near total disinterest in the religious rites of organised religion. Different churches struggle with extreme diversity of viewpoint over issues such as women priests and gay ministers. Criteria for moral choice is often based on what others choose to do, rather than on principle, and among the young, reference to 'the church' is almost non-existent. These realities point to the truth that we are living in a different world than when many of our religious formulas were first expressed or our own religious practices introduced to us. The vast discoveries of science and a limited appreciation of how to read the Bible have led many to discredit the foundations on which much of our faith tradition is based. At the core, there is a challenge to consider our very image of God.

If we imagine God as a strict judge who is ready to punish us and wants us to 'make satisfaction' for our sins, the way we relate to God and others, how we pray and worship, will be quite different from how this would be, if we imagined God as ever loving, merciful, compassionate and inviting us to fellowship with others. Most of us have seen a church that was built fifty years ago or earlier. Its design reflects a clear focus that is radically different from a church designed in the last ten years. Both buildings tell us something about an image of God we have at the time.

If the worship practised in the fifty year old church is transferred without change to the new church, immediate contradictions that can be sensed.

Many people remember that the mystery surrounding church worship forty years ago was enhanced by the design of the church, the atmosphere of silence, the use of candles, incense and drama and particularly the use of Latin language. The changes directed by Vatican 2 invited us to recognise that the great mystery we celebrated was not limited to the elements of bread and wine, but to ourselves; we, though many, are united into a single 'body' and called to be Christ for others. Every time we gather for Eucharist, this is the mystery we celebrate and are sent out to live.

We know now that many traditional practices did not come from the Scriptures, but from many centuries ago and not surprisingly, they reflect the world view and morality of that era. The church attempted to counter the developments of science and in doing so, replacing much of its myth, metaphor, narrative and story for reason. Much of this reason was soon disproved by science and many of the intellectual classes abandoned the church which then turned to the uneducated, thus missing out on the positive influence the better educated could have on society. In the nineteenth century the church used coercion and guilt, including threats of damnation further ensuring opposition from those who sought reason, social progress and personal freedom.

Galileo claimed that the earth was not the centre of the universe and that it moved around the sun. This did not fit with how the church and science of the time understood the world and shaped theology. Because his view contradicted Scripture, Galileo was accused of heresy and forced to recant his theories. The discoveries in our own times, of a seemingly endless universe prompt scientists and theologians to ask new questions about the nature of God. Where is God in this immensity? Is God localised or is God everywhere? When you pray, is God sitting on a cloud just above, listening only to you? Where does your prayer 'go'? Is God a person? Is God masculine? What and where is heaven? Did God become incarnated in creation, in every aspect of nature, not just in Jesus?

In recent years we have learned a great deal about the world that was previously unknown, including the story of how and when varying species have lived on our planet. Many nature programmes highlight the complex and sometimes astounding activity of animals and plants that were unknown to previous generations. Scientists have dated fossils three and half billion years old. They suggest breathing became possible when oxygen became present two billion years ago. Various forms of plant and animal life emerged after this but many species became extinct during the great Ice Age one million eight hundred years ago. Modern man, they claim may have existed only sixty thousand years. These scientific realities were not known by earlier generations, but our young people are growing up aware of them. The world we once knew never was.

Whether it is science or theology, both represent our best attempts to explain our experience of the unknown, not the known. Many experts thought that Isaac Newton's 17<sup>th</sup> century work was the final explanation for understanding the mechanics of the entire physical world. But the laws he discovered do not work with very small things like atoms or with very fast things like objects traveling near the speed of light. Despite this, most humans interpret reality in terms of Newton's understanding of things; e.g., every object is separate from every other object, physical and spiritual are not connected, every physical happening has a cause and every cause has an effect. This is similar to society 500 years ago which related to a flat earth. Anyone who suggested otherwise was burned at the stake.

By the second half of the 20th century, quantum mechanics was born, which did a good job of explaining what Einstein could not about the intricacies of atoms. Unfortunately, while Einstein's theory explained some things and quantum mechanics explains others, the two theories are in conflict of each other. By 1980, a new group of physicists begin to discover 'superstring theory' suggesting that light, motion, energy, atoms, and molecules are all connected. This theory claims that we live in a unified world and that every object is connected to every other object. Everything is intertwined and we are part of it, because we too are made up of atoms.

This suggests that we are not living in an evolving world, but co-evolving with the world, and there is much more to the universe than our senses can perceive. While physicists are beginning to verbalize this theory of everything being connected, philosophers and theologians are saying the same thing from a completely different starting point. Here, too, the theory of 'everything' has emerged, describing in a new way our understanding of the global community.

Because of these realities, we are challenged in many ways today to make our faith relevant, and to understand the proper place of myth which explains how we understand ourselves in the light of the biggest questions we can ask. 'Who am I?' 'How did I get here?' 'Why am I here?' Myth is not 'make believe'. It is meaning making. Myth is a metaphor in story form that is intended to convey the most profound spiritual truth, which is not communicable by everyday language. Every culture has such myths. (e.g The Dreaming and Rainbow serpent in Australia and Maui or Papatuanuku & Ranginui in New Zealand. The myth of creation in Genesis has profound religious insights. God creates freely and generously, humans are created in God's image and are in close friendship with God, each other and all creation. Sin and death are recognised as real. The myth explains that these realities came about because we did not live according to the original designs of God who is all giving. The meaning of the myth is in its inner truth, not in literal interpretation.

Our image of God determines our theology, which is the words we use to attempt to explain our belief. What does it mean to be created in God's image? God as spirit cannot speak, nor hold our hand. God as spirit cannot write a beautiful melody or play sport. We give God shape and form. When our friends show their love, is this not God in human form? Does not the sight of a new born baby, a stark mountain, a clear lake, an aged tree or an eagle in flight, impel us to recognise that God is in every living thing? This awareness calls for our spirituality to be connected with God in life – all life. The world around us is not an object for us to exploit or dispose of as we choose. God lives and breathes in every aspect of life. When we misuse our environment, we ignore God present in everything created.

In 1854 Chief Seattle had seen his world turned upside and during the treaty negotiations in 1854 he recited a remarkable speech. His insights proved prophetic and can serve today as both a warning and an inspiration. In part of this speech he said, *"Our religion is written in the hearts of our people. Every part of this country is sacred to my people. Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove has been hallowed by some fond memory or some sad experience of my tribe. Even the rocks, which seem to lie dumb as they swelter in the sun along the silent shore in solemn grandeur thrill with memories of past events connected with the fate of my people, the very dust under your feet responds more lovingly to our footsteps than to yours, because it is the ashes of our ancestors, and our bare feet are conscious of the sympathetic touch, for the soil is rich with the life of our kindred."*

If our image of God is as an ever present dictator of the universe who makes things happen or prevents them, then we struggle with the presence of evil and when tragedy happens we ask 'Why did God allow this to happen?' We know evil does exist and that our universe is not perfect. Death is a reality and it existed before the first human walked the earth. Nothing is perfect. Life is always moving forward, growing and changing. Natural occurrences such as earthquakes, floods and fires show creation is still groaning and coming to birth, as St Paul wrote.

Our freedom to act leads us sometimes to make wrong choices and this impacts on others. Does God cause this? Is this the nature of God? Our Christian belief is that God allows us freedom and that God's nature is all loving and life-giving and God 'wants' life, love and fellowship to come to full expression. This is God's 'will'. In surrendering to this will we are seeking not to know that God wants a particular event to occur or not occur, but that life will come from it. Because God is present in everything, God is present in pain and tragedy and also present and living beyond it. For this reason we know death is not the end. God seeks life!

Much of our inherited spirituality was shaped by a different world than ours today. It came not only from a different era, but a different culture. Life in the twenty-first century is vastly different from life in any previous age. Farmers use machinery that has made traditional methods outmoded. Doctors perform some operations today that could not have been carried out even twenty years ago. The separateness and relative 'newness' of our continent, the climate and customs make life in Australia and New Zealand vastly different from the European world of Christendom. If we truly accept that God is 'everywhere' and that God lives in all creation with an abiding love, then we do not have to 'buy' or 'win' God's love. God is already present with us and we limit God's effect to the extent that we do not recognise and give wholesome expression to this presence.

The same God that is vaster than hundreds of galaxies is also within each of us. We do not have to seek this God other than in our own hearts and the hearts of those around us. Our spirituality has to express this basic relationship with God, others and all creation. There has to be something of what Chief Seattle knew about God's spirit being present in everything. We have a responsibility to allow the unique presence of God within us to emerge and have effect in the way we live. We have to take off the blindfold that prevents us from giving expression to this sacred image. "You are God's temple and God's spirit dwells in you" (1 Cor 3:16)

We seek unity with others and with creation. We can achieve this when we seek to be inclusive rather than wanting to create a hierarchy of who is right and more favoured. The separation of heaven and earth, body and spirit, head and heart, sacred and secular, Catholic and Protestant, Christian and Muslim denies the presence of the all embracing God in every form of life. Our understanding of God, like others before us, is conditioned by time and place, language and culture, thinking and depth of appreciation of the great realities. Our words and definitions are only attempts to explain what we cannot fully know or understand.

Through Jesus, our spirituality gives us an insight into the relationship between God and humans and between and among humans. These insights reflect Jesus' dream of universal fellowship. Increasingly, we are challenged by issues of social justice and not just by individual morality. There are corrupt systems that allow poverty to deprive people of their basic rights and the temple of God present in the hearts of millions of people, is deeply wounded.

Serious environmental issues are largely ignored by Christians, reluctant to have their comfortable lifestyle inconvenienced. If our spirituality is to be real, we have to face these issues. Youth today will be more excited by such spirituality, so we are challenged to be mentors for them if we are willing. More than anything else that calls for us to practice what we say we believe.

Christian spirituality is to do with connectedness, but it has to include tradition, history and religious heritage. Some enthusiasts campaign to protect rivers or forests, but seem disinterested in the concerns of their fellow humans. The search for connectedness must lead to a desire for community. The Passionist Family Group Movement strives to do this, but unless we recognise or discover the deeper aims, we can easily settle for bar-b-ques and social activities, rather than live a true spirituality through our Family Group community.

In spiritual transformation we are drawn into a relationship with an invisible sacred presence that changes us. This change is something like what happens to the caterpillar that enters its cocoon and emerges as a butterfly. It is still itself, but it is changed into a deeper potential. Such transformation is our calling. We have glimpses of this in eerie experiences such as coincidence, premonition and déjà vu encounters. We struggle with the now and not yet and we are forever trying to understand the relationship between holding on and letting go and to trust the spiritual growth that comes from the latter.

We need to rediscover the meaning that Jesus gave. "The only sign I will give you" he said, "is the sign of Jonah". This is his image for this transformation that we need. The early Christian symbols were of the whale, not the cross. Jesus had invited people to see that it is necessary to go into that dark place where you can't fix it or explain it or understand it. In this place we are not in control. Gethsemane is a rich symbol for this place of darkness where we face and find God. Jesus said "unless a grain of wheat falls in the ground it remains a single grain, but if it dies it produces a rich harvest". This is not something a person sets out to do; it happens to us! It makes sense to seek connection with the deepest realities of life and with our fellow humans, and to seek meaning and well-being in a world of relentless change.

Therefore at a time when so many people feel disconnected or alienated, it is not surprising that interest in spirituality is on the rise. Karl Marx sought a socio-economic revolution to overcome alienation and this was embraced by the populus. In a similar way, despite the opposition of those in political and financial power, and sometimes those in ecclesiastical power, there is a spirituality revolution beginning, and the PFG's can either play a role in developing it, or miss the opportunity, content with lesser goals. That so many people have been drawn to it speaks of its richness, but many have not integrated the relationships they are building, the celebrations they enjoy, and the people they are caring for, with a drive to ensure that the family is truly 'for all' nor with the spirituality of Christian faith that calls for moral integrity and communal worship

There are many diverse forms of spirituality which seek connection with all life, in a way that was often overlooked in the past. Some popular Christian spirituality has expressed negative attitudes towards sexuality and nature and seemed to be 'other-worldly', private and unrelated to the world. An unhealthy separation of 'pure' and 'impure' does not reflect what Jesus was like. He was content that the weeds grew up with the wheat. Christians need a spirituality that is real and helps them relate to sacred and the secular without division. It needs to be inclusive, outreaching, joyful, communal, compassionate, celebratory and relevant to everyday needs and hopes.



Western thinking wants to rationalise and explain everything, but it is a common experience of the mystics to suggest “that if you can understand it, it’s not of God”. Great religion is about transformation. The big question is ‘what do we do with our pain?’ If we don’t hold our pain, we pass it on. Jesus’ in the cross, held it; absorbed and refused to pass it on. So many of the people we know are in pain. They have been seduced into thinking that since much physical pain can be dulled or eliminated, that emotional or spiritual pain can also be easily removed or avoided. Darkness is always present alongside the light. Pure light blinds, only the mixture of darkness and light allows us to see clearly. We need not be afraid of the darkness.

In many ways this has been a constant dilemma of the Church. It has wanted to live in perfect light, where God alone lives. We can see in Christian history the Eastern Church trying to create heavenly liturgies with little sense of social justice, Luther with his abhorrence for his own darkness, the Swiss Reformers trying to outlaw darkness and the Puritans trying to repress it. The Roman Church has been consistently unable and unwilling to see its own darkness and the typical believer has been afraid of darkness. Fundamentalists turn darkness into a preoccupation with Satan. All of us, it seems, are trying to find ways to avoid the great human mystery, instead of learning how to enter the darkness and live there, as Jesus did.

Going to church seems enough for some, while creating fellowship is considered an accidental and unimportant by product and social justice an almost forgotten dimension. True spirituality engages with the world and seeks to meet and transform it. Today the popularity of Eastern meditation is being readily mixed with the mystical traditions of the West, the creation spirituality of North America and other traditions. The fact that it is environmentally friendly, appeals to the young generation.

Sometimes religious knowledge can become a barrier to spirituality, especially if we make the mistake of thinking that our images of the sacred are the divine reality itself. If God becomes too narrowly understood or too familiar to us, or if our rituals become too mundane, we fail to express the truth of the sacred that is always beyond us. This is a danger for institutional religion which can find itself primarily concerned with ethical living and private morality and blind to new expressions of the sacred and how to respond. The history of the western church includes many instances of excommunication or banishment of creative spiritual thinkers who were later proven to be people of wisdom and deep faith. If religion cannot be open to new ways of the sacred being revealed it resists the creativity of the sacred spirit which ‘blows where it wills’.

In our present age, spirituality is being valued for holding our hopes of interconnectedness, while religion is under attack for being an outdated and irrelevant authority somewhat discredited by the behaviour of some senior representatives. However we need religion to carry spirituality. Without spirituality we have no truth to celebrate and no contact with the living sacred presence. Without religion, there is no organised way of communicating or expressing truth nor sacred rituals to bind individuals into a living community. Since the Christian world has been converted to secularism, if not in theory, certainly in practice, preaching is no longer for the ‘converted’ for we all need conversion to the gospel message of sharing with our neighbour and serving the less fortunate, the alienated and broken.

A large number of people seem to be running on spiritual emptiness, their spiritual fuel gauge having registered on low for some time. Too many suffer acute or chronic depression, and many young adults and even teenagers suffer from emotional burnout.

These are not just personal health problems, but expressions of spiritual unhealth. Many people are confused about the values and visions that give life meaning, often caught in a trap that demands more time at work to pay for an improved lifestyle. Driven by materialism and consumerism, many learn too late that possessions do not of themselves bring happiness. Our quality of life has been eroded by obsessive materialism. We need a new enlightenment, a new language and a new concept of the sacred. Karl Jung declared that religious impulses can lead to health and renewal, but if not understood can lead to personal illness and social pathology

Churches do not seem to be speaking a language that the modern world can understand. The family unit is no longer infused with spiritual meaning as one generation fails to pass on its traditions to the next and the extended family has largely been dissolved by changing social conditions. The nuclear family is in crisis with high divorce rates as commitment to a partner decreases in importance, and personal desires and competing ambitions struggle under the weight of balancing the complex demands of modern life. Our Passionist Family Groups have been able to make a practical response to these realities and in doing so, they have taught us a new awareness about how the compassion of Jesus must be the hallmark of a Christian community.

Modern life is obsessed with youthfulness, and the aged are largely considered an inconvenience. The Australian anthem boasts that "we are young and free". The Aboriginal people are not young. One elder said in 1988 "Australia is too old to celebrate birthdays!" In ancient cultures and still in Aboriginal and Pacific Island cultures, the desires of youth are seen to be self-serving, not cultural or spiritual. Initiation ceremonies terminate the state of youth and mark a transition to take up responsibility for the community. The elders are the ones who hold on to and pass on traditions.

Modern western culture locks away the elderly in retirement homes, where they are seen more as a burden than a gift. Instead of being recognised for their wisdom they are pitied for no longer being young. Since people are seen increasingly as a commodity, their usefulness is often seen as their measure of worth, in contradiction to the deepest Christian values which hold a deep and profound respect for human life. That vast amounts of money can be generated by selling products to a culture keen to 'be young' ignores the great wisdom that comes with age and which is therefore connected in a special way to the sacred, not the passing world. The Jewish people used the term 'wisdom' to describe God. In our Passionist Family Groups we must proclaim the value of the elderly not just in statements of vision but in day to day practice.

There is a risk of imposing fundamentalist images of God upon our youth. As we well know, religious groups can easily claim to have sole access to truth and insist on conformity to their ideology. If we are open to religious experience we have to admit to being naïve at times, and acknowledge the growth and change that has followed our new insights. We will never fully know or understand. Spirituality that ignores rationality breeds superstition, wild enthusiasm and emotionalism which is sometimes evident in our Christian youth ministries. At the same time, rationality without spirituality leads to dryness, inhumanity and lack of meaning, which many suicidal youth experience. These two dimensions need to be blended and balanced, especially if we are to present to our youth a spirituality that is relevant to their world and if we are to find effective ways of inviting young adults to join a Family Group.

Statistics in England show that the greatest percentage of people who do not believe in God belong to the towns of Oxford and Cambridge. Modern intellectual culture has remained strictly secular, and this has driven a wedge between those who think about 'this' world and long to change it (the social reformers) and those who reflect on the 'other' world and long for improvement. This separateness of our spiritual and social world is false, and our desire to change the world quickly runs out of steam if it is not replenished or directed by the spirit. We do not have the mental capacity to bring about lasting change in this world until we have opened ourselves and our culture to the possibility of transformation. Nothing great or lasting can be achieved with purely secular motivations. Getting together for a pot luck dinner or rejoicing that a Family Group is 'just social' will not on its own bring about the kingdom of God.

Spirituality is definitely alive. The cartoons, drawings and prayers of Australian artist Michael Leunig have had an amazing influence on people's attitudes. Many people are switching from 'seeing is believing' to a more ancient, 'religious' position that 'believing is seeing'. Australian author David Tacey suggests that the areas that appear to be giving rise to a new spirituality in Australia include the experience of nature and landscape, the environment, Aboriginal reconciliation, the visual arts, popular life-history and story-telling, Eastern religions, the therapeutic and mental health professions, human resources and industry leadership, the natural health movement, and a kind of general hunger for personal and cultural renewal.

Some people argue that Australians and New Zealanders are naturally reluctant to talk about religious matters, that we are shy about spirituality, and there are some Passionist Family Group members who feel that way. Behind this attitude is a fear that too much talk about religion will prove to be divisive or that there the group will suddenly become 'religious', whereas it is already that! However there is a real crisis of meaning in the community, and the problems associated with constant social change. There is an erosion of the old public morality, the breakdown of family structures, high levels of unemployment and instability in the workplace, and the public emergencies created by drugs, alcohol, crime and increasing suicide urge us to take stock of 'what really matters' and talk about this with one another.

Australians and New Zealanders are very secular in their thinking but if we seek to change the world without being directed or refreshed by the spirit, we run out of steam. We need first to open ourselves to the transformative possibilities of the sacred. Mystical Christianity is a call to who you are in the sacred. It is about 'Who I am'. It involves intimacy, surrender, love and communion. It has nothing to do with technique, method, performance or 'what should I do ?' The true self (one's soul) cannot be destroyed. The false self (reputation, title, ego, image, education etc) is when we don't know that there is a true self .

It has been suggested that there are four pillars which underpin Christian spirituality. There is a risk that Passionist Family Group life neglects this first pillar for fear it is 'too religious'. This first pillar is our private prayer and morality. Jesus said "If anyone loves me he or she will keep my commandments." In past eras, this dimension was emphasised above any others and sometimes to their exclusion. Fear of fundamentalism or piety leads many people to put little emphasis on a personal relationship with the sacred, with God. If we lack an intimacy with God and a morality that flows from this, we will be left with an ideology and no core tradition to pass on to another generation. We need to be intense in our efforts to live a morality that is integrated with our personal relationship with the sacred and true to it. If we do not, we may well find that "just when I was being praised for my spiritual insights, I felt devoid of faith."

A second pillar is social justice. Jewish prophets taught that quality of faith depended upon a sense of justice and this could be gauged by how the vulnerable groups such as the widows, orphans and the poor were treated. Sincerity of heart and prayer were not enough. Jesus took this further, by suggesting how we treat the poor is how we treat God. Modern spirituality, in its quest to know the sacred or to deepen self-awareness tends to overlook this vital dimension of true spirituality that identifies with the needy among us. Although we can feel powerless in the face of systems that alienate and disadvantage the poor, it is a feeble excuse to claim the church should not be involved in politics, for true religion is involved in life as it is lived.

The issues of our fellow humans must always be the issues that concern us, or else our spirituality is unbalanced. The secret is to be men and women of compassion. The challenge to Passionist Family Groups is to be active in reaching out to the marginalised and offering them a sense of belonging. It might also be possible, given the power of a group, that some excess resources of the Family Group could be shared with the less fortunate at times of particular need such as in response to critical national or international events. Hopefully, as we become more aware of the invitation to balance our spirituality we might see some Passionist Family Groups keener to give good witness to issues of the integrity of creation, justice and peace.

The third pillar is to have a grateful heart. Most of us have seen Christians doing good out of duty, with a bitter or unpleasant disposition. Some of the religious elders of Jesus' time were scandalised that Jesus and his disciples were not continually fasting. Jesus advised them that one does not fast while the wedding feast is still being celebrated. Jesus was vitally aware of and concerned for the poor, but he still managed to earn the reputation of a 'drunkard and a glutton'. Celebrating with friends and family was obviously a significant way of keeping a thankful heart. Jesus did not dream of everyone having little but of a banquet at which everyone would be satisfied. This is a special opportunity for those in a Passionist Family Group and it has been cause for some to be critical of the joyful get togethers. However, celebrating with our Family Group brothers and sisters month in and month out, is a wonderful sign of God's presence.

The fourth pillar is to belong to a faith community. As we know, modern spirituality tends to see the church as irrelevant. People seek the sacred but they do not want religion. They seek God, but not church. However we need a faith community. We need fellow faith travellers with whom to share and celebrate. A Passionist Family Group gives us fellow faith travellers. Unfortunately our religious culture makes us wary of both sharing our faith experiences and celebrating them, so much of the potential of a Passionist Family Group to be a true faith community is lost at the expense of rejoicing in being 'just social'.

The challenge is critical and the time ahead is brief. Already a generation of PFG members can look behind and ask, 'who is coming behind us?' We must be serious in discerning what the next generation needs so that we can pass on something of value. At the same time, we should not fall into the trap of living ahead of ourselves. It may be that something different will emerge. That we cannot identify it does not mean it cannot happen. We have our own lives to lead, our own faith to live. Parish structures as we have known them are collapsing, so the spirituality that underpins our Christian life must reflect what we truly seek.

The PFGM is not the only way to live Christian faith, but it is a way of life, not just a social group. Many who begin the journey see only this dimension and this is what attracts them.

It would be foolish not to acknowledge the advantage of this, but it would be just as foolish to overlook the potential we have for providing a means for living faith in a real and practical way. We have to be aware that secularism runs deep among us, and our joy that a PFG is not overtly religious can cause us to ask whether we are of God or not. We are best to seek a well rounded wholesome spirituality connected to life. We do not do justice to this when we take God out of PFG life. The sacred is present in all our interpersonal encounters and celebrations, drawing us on to the greater Christian challenge of inclusion, compassion and justice for all.

Brian  
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Traynor

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