

How can we touch the imagination of the young in this digital age?

A life-giving imagination must hold together different and apparently irreconcilable desires/. Pope Francis wrote: ““What would a society, a family, or a group of friends be like without tension or conflict? Do you know what it would be? It would be a cemetery. Because only in dead things are there no tensions and no conflicts. When there is life, there is tension and there is conflict.””¹”

This tension is the heart of Christianity: Jesus proclaims that whoever wishes to save his life must lose it. (Matthew 16.25). We shall touch the imagination of the young if we identify the tensions with which they live in this digital age and show how they may be lived fruitfully and joyfully.

First of all, I would say they long for both security and adventure. Jonathan Haidt famously declared that they belong to an anxious generation. He wrote: “Gen Z is the first generation to have gone through puberty hunched over smartphones and tablets, having fewer face-to-face conversations and shoulder-to-shoulder adventures with their friends. As childhood was rewired—especially between 2010 and 2015—adolescents became more anxious, depressed, and fragile.”²”

Yet the desire for adventure is present in every human heart, the risk of loving. My brother Herbert McCabe said, ‘If you fall in love, you will get hurt. You may even be killed. But if you do not, you are dead already.’

Tolkien’s books, especially *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are among the most popular books ever published. They articulate the relationship between this desire for safety and the hunger for adventure. The Shire, the land of the hobbits, is the supremely safe home, untouched by the rise of evil. Then Gandalf turns up with a dangerous invitation: ‘I am looking for someone to share in an adventure that I am arranging, and it's very difficult to find anyone.’ Bilbo replies: ‘I should think so — in these parts! We are plain quiet folk and have no use for adventures. Nasty disturbing uncomfortable things! Make you late for dinner!’³ But in Bilbo’s heart is an

¹ Speech at Verona.

² *The Anxious Generation: How the Great* p.64.

³ J.R.R. Tolkien (2012). *“The Hobbit”*, p.7, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

unquenchable longing for adventure. Tolkien was, of course, a devout Catholic. He came to Mass at Blackfriars, and I attended his funeral! He described his work as a pre-Christian story for a post-Christian age. He wrote to his son Michael that he was inspired by the adventure of the Eucharist. These stories articulate the tension between the love of a safe home, and the impulse to set on the perilous adventure.

So we shall touch the imagination of the young if we can offer them both a safe home and the invitation to die. St Paul wrote: ‘³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.’ (chapter 8). And yet this same love summons us to walk with the Lord to Jerusalem.

This paradoxical love – so safe and so dangerous– is founded on acute attention to the other. The digital world is filled with distraction. One of my brethren, Toby Lees, wrote: ‘Countless messages purporting to be personal will have been competing for your attention... because in a world of abundant products and near-infinite information, the true scarcity is attention and so that is what the companies and political parties fight for... Our phones exist like Gollum’s ring in our pockets; entertainment or distraction is there all the time.’⁴

Simone Weil called attention ‘the rarest and purest form of generosity’⁵; it is seeing others ‘as they relate to themselves and not to me.’⁶ Iris Murdoch: ‘Love is the extremely difficult realisation that someone other than oneself is real’.⁷ This invites us to be unafraid to be the object of attention ourselves. We dare to be seen. A video clip of two young Dominican sisters laughing together went viral this summer. Sr Gemma Simmonds explained their enormous attraction thus: ‘The discovery that you were loved before anyone swiped, checked a profile, or decided whether you were worth their time, and this fact, quietly received rather than anxiously earned, changes what freedom feels like from the inside.’⁸

⁴ March 2025, Letter from Radio Maria.

⁵ David Brooks *he Feminine Way to Wisdom* *Comment: Public Theology for the Common Good*, Fall 2023, p. 31

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ Iris Murdoch, *The Sublime and the Good in Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, Penguin, 1999, p.215

⁸ *The Tablet*, ‘You are so good at that’, 15/22/29 August 2026, p.25)

There is an analogous tension in the area of Church teaching. Many young people are drawn to Catholicism because they perceive the Church as faithful to the gospels and tradition. The Church is never going to renounce a belief in the Resurrection or the divinity of Christ. Dogma may develop, as Newman taught us, but it will never be renounced. The young long for certainty. They say, ‘Catholics know what they believe.’

This sureness is in tensions with our Faith as an intellectual adventure. Pope Benedict XVI said, “We do not possess the truth, the truth possesses us: Christ, who is the truth, has taken us by the hand, and we know that His hand is holding us securely on the path of our quest for knowledge.” We embrace the teachings of the Church, but we are always only at the beginning of understanding them. Their meaning is glimpsed at the edge of language. Certainty without the quest is fundamentalism; questioning without fidelity to the tradition would easily fall into relativism. So how do we touch the imagination of the young with beauty of truths that are both given, now and forever, and yet are always to be sought?

Wisdom is more than the mastery of data. AI is better at us in that. Yes, the truths of our faith *are* facts – Mary was a virgin who gave birth to a child, the tomb was empty on Easter morning – but they are more than facts. They are truths to be lived. Pope Leo wrote in *Magnificans Humanitas*: ‘The speed and ease with which answers or summaries can be obtained risk extinguishing the desire to ask questions, which is a process that bears fruit only over time. As Plato wrote, the deepest and most important things are learned only after much time and effort, by engaging in discussion with others, “striking upon” ideas and experiences together like flint until the spark of understanding is kindled within us.’ (para 140)

St Thomas Aquinas taught that understanding is a way of being humanly alive. Boyd Taylor Coolman wrote that we need ‘an educational culture in which it is good *simpliciter*, in and of itself, for humans to read, think, converse, wonder and ask, if for no other reason than the intrinsic value of such activities—or that such activities are, in and of themselves, sources of delight and joy, ingredient in human flourishing. When a human intelligence does these things, it cannot, by definition, be superseded or replaced by A.I., even if A.I. can simulate those things better and faster than humans can generate them.’⁹

We touch the imagination of the young by leading them into the transformative beauty of understanding which leads to wonder, astonishment, awe. Thus they will encounter the *Logos*

⁹ ‘The medieval understanding of intelligence is exactly what we need in the age of AI.’ *America* 17 2026.

‘which was with God in the beginning. ³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴’ (John 1.2 – 4).

God’s conversation with humanity in the Bible usually revolve around questions. The first conversation begins with God’s question to Adam, ‘Where are you?’ One of the last in St John’s gospel is Jesus’ question to Simon Peter: ‘Do you love me more than these others?’ In Mark and Matthew’s gospels, the last words of Jesus are a haunting question: ‘My God, my God why have you abandoned me?’

Profound questions invite us to become alive more deeply. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote: ‘Don’t search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.’¹⁰ The life of grace is perpetually beginning. St Teresa of Avila said, ‘It is we who have begun this work. It is up to those who follow to keep on beginning.’

Paul Murray OP recounts the story of an Archbishop who, talking to a group of novices, he declared: ‘Make sure that all of you read the *Summa* of Aquinas. It contains fifty-six thousand answers to all those who criticize the Catholic Church!’ He comments ‘St Thomas, if he heard that declaration, would surely turn in his grave!’¹¹ Aquinas gives us marvellous answers to questions, but the questions abide and will do so until we see God face to face.

Work is a dimension of our human dignity. It gives meaning to our lives. But what if A. I eliminates most employment? Dario Amodei, the chief executive of Anthropic, said that AI could wipe out “half of all entry-level white-collar jobs within five years.” Matthew Harvey Sanders wrote: ‘For as long as there have been human beings, the question “how will you eat?” has been answered, for most people, by some version of “I will work.” That equation is what economists, theologians, and politicians have been arguing about for two centuries. And it may be, within the working lives of people sitting in this room, that the equation simply dissolves.’ Elon Musk admitted that “If a computer can do everything better than you, does your life have meaning?” Industrialists are beginning to ask what human beings are for if they are no longer needed for the economy. So we need urgently a new vision of work, which is not about survival,

¹⁰ *Letters to a young Poet*, Letter 4, July 16th 1903. Translated by N. D. Herter Norton.

¹¹ ‘Dominicans and the Key of Knowledge, A Talk to Dominican Friars Studying in Rome’ - PUST, Angelicum, 19 February 2023, unpublished

but about being human. In *Magnificans Humanitas*, Pope Leo that ‘the primary choice is not between a “yes” or “no” to technology, but rather between constructing Babel or rebuilding Jerusalem; between a power that claims to dominate the heavens and a people who work together in the presence of God to rebuild the walls of fraternal coexistence.’ (para 9)

Once again, this demands an attention to others that no A.I can give. Sanders again: ‘The chaplain at the bedside. The nurse who notices that something is wrong before the monitors do. The social worker. The priest in the confessional. The teacher who stays after class because the child is hesitating at the door. These are not jobs in the GDP sense. They are, I’d suggest, a form of being with another person, a way of being present that is itself the substance of the work, not the wrapping around it. Presence can be imitated. It cannot be replicated.’

Think of the attention that a farmer gives to the soil, a carpenter to the wood or stone, the sailor to the wind and the waves, a painter to the world. This attention is the opening of our being to what is other than ourselves. It is a wisdom that is transformative of who we are. It releases us from the detachment of the internet into the complexity and beauty of creation. Aquinas liked the expression of Aristotle: the soul is in a sense all things. We love and savour the world. That can ignite the imagination of the young, releasing them from the abstractions of the digital continent.

So, we have looked at the security and risk of love, the certainty and questioning of faith, and at work. In every case, we need a loving attention, patiently acquired, which draws us out of narcissism into the astonishment of creation and our Creator.