

GC 35, FRONTIERS, AND SHARING OUR FAITH WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

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Introduction

I'm not a school chaplain – although I did once work, with great joy, in a secondary school and would have happily returned to that – but I think I may have some idea of what it is like to have a kind of exasperated, compassionate love for one's students! Like a compassionate Jesus standing above Jerusalem, looking down not with judgment but with love, so too you can find yourself casting a compassionate 'glance' at your students as they 'do their thing,' so often uncomprehendingly, and your heart fills with a sort of understanding and concern for them. This does not happen every day... but, when it's given, it's an important experience to build on. As St. Ignatius depicts the Trinity looking on the muddled and messy world prior to the incarnation – and then sending the Son, full of all their love, into the heart of that mess – so too you (at times at least) want to join with that incarnating act and be, yourselves, the compassionate love of God present in the needy world of your students. This is a grace, a gift from God, a moment to build on and cherish.

The greatest *frontier* ever crossed – or better, bridged – is the one between God and humanity; we refer to it as the *incarnation*: God becoming human. It was God's passion for us driving him to become flesh, one like us, in God's Son, Jesus. It made everything tumble down (like dams bursting, or slabs of concrete being pushed apart) and it cemented together Lover and beloved, so that a gap was covered forever. Now, in chaplains' work of *crossing frontiers to reach young people* (I take this idea from your JECSE letter!), the incarnation continues as you, for your students, seek to become the eyes and ears, the hands and feet, of Jesus, who is the heart of Christian faith, for them. He now needs *your* flesh so as to reach them, to cross frontiers to them; it is an awesome idea, an awesome opportunity, an awesome responsibility; and there can be no doubt of its importance in a world where Christian faith has to fight for its life today.

To make concrete that picture of looking compassionately, with Jesus, at your students, I recall an image of mornings, seeing students making their way to class at Holy Cross College in Massachusetts just five years ago, when I was there. Although I was teaching these 18-22 year-olds, being a teacher was at that moment much less academic than pastoral, as I wished for them *accompaniment*: a sense that a hidden presence walked with them and that, amid all their ups and downs, they were not alone. This was a gift that I myself had occasionally received, especially during moments when I felt my task beyond me, as when *en route* to the Congregation through the streets of Rome in 2008; and I wished they knew about and could *lean into* this being-accompanied, so that it would sustain them, pull them through, lift them to flourishing and eventually even to a responding love. But don't think I'm always starry-eyed like this! From my

time in secondary school I recall the question posed by a realistic senior teacher in response to my saying ‘they’re not so bad’ about a large group of students that we were supervising as they took their exams: ‘how many of them would you adopt?’ *That* was a sobering thought; instantly it banished all the mushy feelings from my heart; and yet I knew, too, that what can be built upon in such situations are the spontaneous affirmations that emerge – ‘yes, I *would* adopt that one!’ – and not the negatives. For the truth is that, if we can really feel positive about the few, we can in principle feel this way about them all, and so be moved, imperceptibly, towards a more *universal love* such as the love experienced by Pedro Arrupe during his ministry to prisoners in New York.

Speaking of Arrupe, and being now near his place (Bilbao), as well as being in Spain, where I think also of St John of the Cross, I remember how, when *he* was thinking about the coming close (the frontier-crossing) of God to human beings in the incarnation, he said that all God wanted there was to establish a mutuality, a relationship on one level, between us and God’s own self. Crazy, but true; and that’s the incarnational vision underlying your question ‘What are the frontiers we have to cross to reach the young people today?’ It is a matter of relationship, of crossing over, of meeting. And of course it means building new bridges and moving out of our own skins and safety zones. This ‘movement out’ lies at the heart of GC 35, its documents on identity and mission especially, the perspectives of which you hope to gain a deeper appreciation of at this conference in Loyola. So let us amble gently towards them now, with our incarnational vision incipiently articulated already, bearing in mind all the stuff about frontier-crossing, to see what some of this might mean in your lives as you seek to be turned, by the images from GC 35, towards the young people who have been sent by Providence across your path.

Tracing What the Documents of GC 35 Say in Relation to Frontiers

Here I shall trace the *explicit* presence of the term ‘frontier’ (in the six decrees of the GC, principally but not exclusively) in an attempt to highlight some of the main ways in which it is used. After that, I shall look briefly at its *implicit* presence in the documents, as well as at the words used to translate the English ‘frontier’, so that we can arrive at an overall sense of what ‘frontier’ signifies. But first, the explicit uses! Like a good German-trained scholar, I have read the texts through and have *counted* all the explicit uses of ‘frontier’; so let’s look at these now!

Explicit Uses of the Word ‘Frontier’

- four in Decree 1, in which the Society of Jesus makes a response to what the Pope has written and said to it (see numbers 6 [twice], 13 and 15)
- four in Decree 2, which is about the identity of Jesuits – and, to a degree, our co-workers – today (see numbers 12, 20 and 24 [two mentions!])

- six in Decree 3, which deals with mission; and one of the six mentions is in the subtitle of this decree (see subtitle and numbers 14, 15 [three times] and 22)¹

The new Father General, Adolfo Nicolás, mentions ‘frontiers’ explicitly three times, once in his address to Pope Benedict XVI at the papal audience with the members of the Congregation on 21 February, 2008, and twice in his homily at the closing mass of the General Congregation on 6th March 2008.² So, in the six decrees, and adding in some of the texts of Father Nicolás, there are 17 explicit uses of the word ‘frontier’ in GC 35. What do these actually express?

Responding to Pope Benedict (in Decree 1), the Congregation picks up on the mission of the Society of Jesus as put before it by the Pope, teasing out its implications as involving the reaching of new frontiers and even quoting the Pope’s own allocution to the members of the Congregation explicitly about being sent “to ‘the physical and spiritual places where others do not reach or have difficulty in reaching’.”³ Here the GC refers to Fr Nicolás’s prior words to the Pope about how these frontiers “can be places of conflict and tension that threaten our reputation, our peace and our security” and, in so doing, it picks up on one of the uses by Fr General of the word ‘frontier’ that was already mentioned above. In that context Fr Nicolás spoke explicitly of “the frontiers where faith and science, faith and justice, and faith and knowledge confront each other, and in the challenging field of serious reflection and responsible theological research.”⁴ The intellectual work to be done today in the life and mission of the Church is a work “at the new frontiers of our times” and will require “creative fidelity” as we remain at the heart of the Church while simultaneously preaching the Gospel (as the Pope himself said in his letter to Fr Kolvenbach at the very beginning of the Congregation) “in very different social and cultural contexts,” thus being “obliged to address different mindsets.”⁵ What the pope and the General are conscious of here is that, by collaborating in the Vicar of Christ’s service for the universal Church, Jesuits’ own work will take them to “the new frontiers of our time(s).”⁶

Decree 2 is an attempt to express the Jesuit charism for our postmodern, image-drenched world; in other words, for the only world our students have known. Entitled, like our conference here in Loyola, ‘A Fire that Kindles Other Fires’, it refers to words used of St Alberto Hurtado, the Chilean, socially-committed Jesuit, who was canonised in 2006. As with him, so we today, in our frontier-crossing missions, are to be fires that ignite other fires, that carry the flame of the Lord’s love and message into new situations and into a changed world. The word ‘frontier’ is

¹ Decrees 4, 5 and 6, dealing, respectively, with Jesuit obedience, mission and collaboration with lay colleagues, do not use the term ‘frontier’ explicitly although they do imply the crossing of frontiers in many ways and places.

² See *The Decrees and Documents of the Thirty-fifth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus* (Oxford, UK: Way Books, 2008), pp. 152 and 181.

³ Decree 1, no. 6, referring to the Allocution of Pope Benedict XVI to the members of the Congregation on 21 st February, 2008, no. 2 (see p. 142 of *The Decrees and Documents...*).

⁴ *The Decrees and Documents...*, p. 152.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 138, in: Letter of Pope Benedict XVI to Fr Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, January 10, 2008, no. 5, referred to also in Decree 1, no. 13.

⁶ See Decree 1, 13 and 15.

used in connection with being disciples who have tasted Christ, the water of life (cf. John 4: 7-15), and with wishing to offer this living water “to anyone who thirsts and to reach out to people beyond frontiers – where water may not yet have welled up” (12). There is here then again, with the idea of ‘frontiers’, the sense of going beyond where Christ is known to irrigate a whole world – ‘rich, diverse and multifaceted’ – that he has not yet watered. Further on in Decree 2, when it comes to speak of the new context for which it is rediscovering the Jesuit charism, it presents this new context as that of a globalised world, a world become one – a worldwide community – that has challenged traditional boundaries and taken us “to New Frontiers” (20). These new frontiers, then, speckle the ‘new context’ section of the document, indicating that, for mission in this new context, “new frontiers beckon that we must be willing to embrace” (24). One such ‘frontier’ is explicitly mentioned: “the earth, increasingly degraded and plundered” (24).

With the title of Decree 3 – ‘Challenges to Our Mission Today: Sent to the Frontiers’ – the focus on frontiers is already clear. And in a section that is entitled ‘Call to Establish Right Relationships: A Mission of Reconciliation,’ the word (and the idea) of ‘frontiers’ appears in plenty. Jesus, in “proclaiming God’s message of love and compassion,” is said to have “crossed over physical and socio-religious frontiers” (14). His ministry of reconciliation is presented as having known no boundaries. The mission of Ignatius and his first companions is placed in the context of this reconciling activity of Christ and the practice of those early Jesuits is seen to have been one of both remaining at the centre *and* going to the frontiers: reaching to the frontiers, the edges, of society, to reconcile the estranged; and being sent “to the frontiers, to the new world, ‘to proclaim the Lord to peoples and cultures that did not yet know him’.”⁷ There is mention, also, of how Ignatius ‘wanted Jesuits to cross other types of frontiers between rich and poor, between educated and unlearned’ (15), so that, as with the earth in the previous decree, what is meant by a ‘frontier’ is concretely named, in a mission of reconciliation that seeks for justice *wherever* it is lacking. Reconciliation lies at the heart of the frontiers-ministry to which Jesuits (and co-workers) are called; response to this call is then expressed as a threefold reconciliation: with God, with one another, and with creation (19-36). It is imaged in the idea that we be bridge-builders (17) and this bridge-building is then linked, in a paragraph speaking of the world’s many religions and cultures, to our call to “the frontiers of culture and of religion” (22). Frontiers and bridge-building go together; we cross the first by means of the second; and our purpose in doing so is *reconciliation*. Here is a central, unifying idea running through the manner in which GC 35 speaks about the mission of the Society of Jesus, and of our co-workers, at the present time.

On considering Fr General’s (double) use of the word ‘frontiers’ in his homily at the closing mass of GC 35, we shall see how our own ministry of crossing frontiers between young people and ourselves can be embraced by what he says. Drawing on a text from the gospel of Mark (chosen for him by others) about the mission of Christ, Fr Nicolás highlights the dynamic character of the mission; and in doing so he employs the notion of ‘frontiers’ liberally. He has been speaking about how the mission has its source in Christ – we all receive it from him – but it

⁷ Decree 3, no. 15 (interior quotation is from Benedict XVI’s Allocution to the members of the Congregation, no. 3).

“ends with others”: we are taken by means of the encounter with Christ, who begins it, to others for whom we receive it. The vision of what happens is very dynamic (I quote):

As I have already said, it is a dynamism which begins in us when we go out to others. Something happens in others and then it is beyond us. The results are there, not here. The vision is very modern. The fruit is not ‘input’ but ‘output’. First of all, go. Go to the whole world. We have spoken of frontiers, or the periphery. The gospel tells us: Go, go. We have indeed gone and we have encountered many problems and made many mistakes at the frontiers. I could tell you about my mistakes, but I know that there have been other mistakes as well. We have come to understand that ‘going’ does not mean simply getting on a plane but entering into the culture, into the life of the people. ‘Going’ means study, research, entering into the life of the people. Solidarity, empathy, inculturation, respect for others. Going to the whole world turns out to be more difficult than we had thought. We feel like children. Perhaps we have discovered the Kingdom of God.⁸

I cannot help noticing that there are many clues here for our work with young people. We have to take risks, jump barriers and frontiers, in order to enter their world. ‘Going’ to them means entering into *their* lives, attending to what things are like for them. Therefore the word ‘inculturation’ is used, the sense being to inhabit their experience before ever thinking we can spread our message. Stand with them (solidarity); feel with them (empathy, deep listening); respect them (they *will* be different). You know and *do* these things already; and in doing them you feel, as Fr Nicolás said, like children yourselves because you have let go more than you have kept, a bit like that great frontier-crossing I mentioned in the Introduction: how the Son of God, in becoming human, spilled his very being as God out into the shape of our human space(s). This presents us with a huge challenge and yet with an incredible invitation also! At the College of the Holy Cross, I sometimes sat with students and just heard from them about what their lives were like: lives drenched with images and stimuli; lives dominated by the mobile phone, which I would see them flick open the minute a class was over – frequently to take a call from what they would refer to as a hovering, ‘helicopter-parent’; lives speckled with uncertainty – due to broken relationships at home and fear of relationships in their own circumstances; lives insecure and doubting, in which they had to fight for an identity and purpose. We are invited to understand these lives, to leave ourselves behind and enter them with compassion and love, following the model of the Incarnation, the most inspiring, most complete frontier-crossing that ever occurred. *Frontiers: Their Implicit Presence and Overall Meaning in GC 35*

As well as an explicit use of the term ‘frontier’, it also enjoys an *implicit* presence in the decrees of GC 35, where its ‘footprints’ can be readily and repeatedly detected. I caught, in my read-through, some 35 additional references either to different frontiers of one kind or another or

⁸ *The Decrees and Documents...*, pp. 181-182.

to various sorts of frontier-activity.⁹ In an article on the mission decree, Fr Marcos Recolons wrote of the concept of frontier that it uses as being ‘new’. Ever since he had been a Jesuit, he said, he had heard that Jesuits were “called to go out to the frontiers and to pursue frontier issues” and, used in this sense, ‘frontier’ was “a geographic term often used metaphorically to speak of intellectual and scientific advances, ideological visions, and so on.”¹⁰ However now, “in our global village,” the term ‘frontier’ had “undergone a change” because, with the free circulation of “ideas, information, merchandise, technology and capital” and – to an extent – persons, frontiers had “become porous, and in many cases they have disappeared.”¹¹ Unlike in times past, there is no longer, for example, “a notion of Christendom with delimited frontiers beyond which lies mission territory.”¹² Societies are multi-religious and multi-cultural; in the places where we live today, Christianity exists side-by-side with other religions, visibly present, and with ‘no religion,’ sometimes even an aggressive atheism. There is much fragmentation, a relativism of values and of religious beliefs (Benedict XVI), a rudderless eclecticism that fosters a bewildering array of recipes and explanations for life but with few foundations to hold on to as we try to muddle through the labyrinth. It is in this situation, according to Fr Recolons, that the ‘new frontiers’ are visible: they are cracks, fissures, broken spaces that separate people from one another and from God. The mission decree asks us to be bridges between them, forces for unity, combating isolation in a fragmented world.¹³ The mission of school chaplains is to be ‘bridges’ too, ‘binding together’ all that fragments in the fragmenting worlds of our students today.

Overall, then, the word ‘frontier’ has a great breadth of meaning. We might speak, in fact, of a wide semantic field surrounding it, with many nuances. Father Nicolás uses the word ‘nations’ of those who await our presence on the ‘underside’ of life; they share our geographical space quite frequently, but they are on its margins, its unincluded edges; and we must reach them at those frontiers. Many youth find themselves at such edges. Even if they belong to families that enjoy inclusion in society, they often eke out their existence together in ‘sub-cultures’ in which they understand one another, to a degree, but are rarely understood by anyone else, even their parents and teachers. This doesn’t mean that the latter (we!) are wilfully blind; but we can be uncomprehending – in the face of how things have evolved. Once when, in a family social situation, I said (or did) some *gauche* thing and my 17-year-old niece, with whom I enjoy a good relationship, rolled her eyes, I asked: ‘What, what?’ Her reply was: ‘you mean you have to *ask*?’ Moments such as these are painful. We see that we do not connect; yet we must keep trying to leap those frontiers. Otherwise we may make judgments too fast, or retreat into defensiveness. It is as much about letting go as catching on; and we need the support of one another in this.

⁹ There are 11 in Decree 2, 10 in Decree 3, 5 in Decree 4, 4 in Decree 5 and 5 in Decree 6.

¹⁰ Marcos Recolons SJ, “What’s New in the Decree on Mission,” *Promotio Iustitiae* 98-99 (2008/1): 13-20, at 18.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, and Decree 3, no. 17.

We could talk about frontiers forever, but by now you have a flavour! Often (as GC 35 also recognised) it is a matter of being happy, or at least willing, to live with *tensions*: we must know how to be at the heart of the Church, and at the edges of the world; at the heart of society, yet reaching out to its margins; rooted in our own identity, but ready for dialogue and exchange. Bridge-builders connect things, joining the different, reconciling the estranged. The documents of GC 35 always have this in mind when calling us to the frontiers, whether they use the French *frontière* or the Spanish *frontera*, or even the German *Grenze* (what is it in Flemish/Dutch?!). I find always the basic sense, in the various translations of the documents, of participating in the mending of a broken world; of working against fragmentation; of reconciling and bringing about reconciliation; of crossing from our known to the unknown of others. This is like Jesus in Mark's gospel, as observed by my literary-but-not-Christian friend; he 'went out', 'went over', 'went to'; he was *on the go!* Or, as Joseph Ratzinger put it: He was "all exodus, all self-surpassing love."¹⁴

Tracing what GC 35 Says about Youth/Young People and Linking it to Frontiers

Decrees 2 and 3, on 'identity' and 'mission' respectively, make explicit mention of the young six times – three times in each decree. Decree 2, no. 10, speaking about the polarity or tension between being contemplative and being active in the world, says that our life should provoke questions such as who are we, what do we do and why do we do it? "In what we do in the world there must always be a transparency to God." The idea is that a double love (love for God and love for God's world) should motivate us, "should set us on fire – a fire that starts other fires!" It is about a way of seeing things: seeing the holy in the human, the sacred in the profane. We have to 'look' at reality in this way, as Ignatius did, finding God in the depths of everything; and we must somehow 'infect' others, the young in particular, with this way of seeing:

We must communicate this way of looking and provide a pedagogy, inspired by the Spiritual Exercises, that carries people – especially the young – into it. Thus will they be able to see the world as St Ignatius did...

Here I cannot but recall my wish, spoken of in the Introduction, that the young people whom we serve would sense themselves accompanied by the hidden presence of a loving God *alive* in the depths of their own experiences and struggles; that they would know that they are not alone. To gently move them towards this vision, the *Spiritual Exercises* can be an awesome resource and a stepping-stone, a bridge, out of life's dryness and into an *experience* of God in their own stories.

Reflecting on the mission of following Christ, Decree 2 shows awareness of how this finds its inspiration in Jesus' own ministry that did not only meet immediate needs but that also restored people to community and reconciled them to God. In other words, it was engagement long-term with different persons/circumstances – and then the text gives, as one example: "the

¹⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), p. 220.

education of youth”. We often work with the same young people over many years, at least six in schools, and sometimes longer there and in other situations. In these longer engagements, the text says, “aided by grace and drawing on whatever professional capacities we may have” (13), we try to offer ourselves fully – to God and, indeed, to those to whom God sends us. The full giving of self is important; we have seen already that frontier-crossing involves this. Now, as *means* facilitating it, are mentioned the grace of God and our professional capacities: again, the holy and the human, but in right order! Without each, we have little hope of achieving anything.

The final mention of the young in Decree 2 is in connection with the community life of Jesuits and how, if it is lived as genuine friendship in the Lord, it can become attractive to others, “inviting them – above all the young – to ‘come and see,’ to join us in our vocation and to serve with us in Christ’s mission” (19). This single explicit mention of the Jesuit vocation in Decree 2 should not distract from the fact that much of the motivation for the decree, overall, with its post-modern, image-laden, non-linear, contemporary-communicative style, was to touch the hearts of young people everywhere and to invite them to a vision that sees God in all things and that seeks to bring God to all places, across all frontiers. Fr Fernando Franco wrote after GC 35:

Living at the frontiers became also an explicit way of expressing the efforts of the Society to understand the post-modern cultural milieu where young people live and from where many young Jesuits come. An honest and sustained effort to face this challenge has enormous implications for our understanding today of a faith doing justice. Blaming young people, including Jesuits, for their lack of social consciousness can at best be interpreted as a middle-age tantrum. The congregation was led to walk ahead on this road not knowing what the end result will be.¹⁵

From these remarks of Fernando Franco, it is evident that neither Decree 2, on identity, nor Decree 3, on mission, was unaware of the characteristics of the contemporary postmodern world which they were addressing and in which young people have grown up. Decree 3 calls for careful discernment of “how we carry out educational and pastoral ministries, especially among youth, in this fast-changing postmodern culture.”¹⁶ Then – and this links in with the presentation already of youth-ministry as frontier-crossing in the pattern of the incarnation – the text speaks of our walking with young people in a way that helps “each other to grow through fragility and fragmentation to joyful integration of our lives with God and with others” and of their “volunteer work with and for the poor” as helping them “find meaning in and direction for their lives” (23).

Concern for young people is evident when Decree 3 talks of the “new communications technologies” that are “among the defining characteristics of our globalised world” (29). These are seen as having “a tremendous impact on all of us, especially the young.” The Congregation highlights their positive potential in the work of education (*inter alia*) – and so, among youth –

¹⁵ Fernando Franco SJ. “Led by Him into the Unknown,” *Promotio Iustitiae* 98-99 (2008/1): 25-31, at 31.

¹⁶ Decree 3, no. 23; see also nos. 10 and 11.

and it encourages “Jesuit institutions to put these new technologies at the service of those at the margins.” The sense is: they must be used to include, to reach across frontiers. This ties up with what was just said about young people working with and for the poor. It links also with the one other passage of Decree 3 that mentions the young – children, in fact – when it refers to how the early Jesuits opened colleges in Rome and other great cities and also “taught children in villages across the world” (15). Ministry to the young was never far from the heart of St Ignatius.

Finally, the section of the Congregation documents devoted to ‘Other Documents of the General Congregation’ includes a paragraph entitled *Youth ministry*. In it, the point is made that “the reality of young people depends on the geographical context” and that what is needed by youth in one place might be different from what is needed by them in another. Thus, as you well know, discerning what it is best to offer must always be part of your work. The *Youth ministry* paragraph says that “in some areas what is needed is listening to young people and promoting a deeper spirituality; in other areas the accent is on inviting young people to participate in social projects or in reaching out to and engaging young people who are not involved.”¹⁷ For ministry to youth, a ‘one size fits all’ approach is not helpful. GC 35 even suggests that each Conference of Provincials consider if it would be helpful to appoint its own coordinator of youth ministry.

Drawing In Your Own Experience – and the Frontiers that You Have to Cross

If we failed at this point to turn to your own circumstances/situations, we would remain in too theoretical a space; and the trick is to *apply* the wisdom of GC 35 to life in its aftermath! From the beginning of these reflections – and even beforehand in your preparatory letter – we have been thinking of ministry to youth in terms of crossing frontiers; and I have suggested that this frontier-crossing will have something of the pattern of the Son of God’s crossing from life among the Persons of the Trinity to life among human beings – to share in all of our experiences. It seems to me that, following this kind of (incarnational) frontier-crossing, two kinds of frontier are met with that must be negotiated: the ones that prevent us from going out of ourselves (recall Fr Nicolás’s ‘going’) and the ones that prevent us from entering into the ‘totally-other’ reality of the life of the young today. There is always letting-go and entering-in. Let me tell you a story!

I arrive at the lift in a college building and there is a student in front of me also waiting for the lift to arrive. I offer a word of greeting and a comment on the slowness of the lift; but nothing comes back to me. So I stay silent, sulking a bit! The doors open and we enter the lift. The student and I are now facing each other and he greets me with a friendly word and a warm smile. It is the first time he has tumbled to my presence.....because he is listening to his MP3 player and heard nothing when I greeted him from behind. “Ah Jim,” I thought, “you were quick to judge; why didn’t you pay more attention?” Something similar happened to me with one of

¹⁷ *The Decrees and Documents...*, p. 127.

my own colleagues who is a quarter century younger than I am; she too lives in a world that I am not really familiar with. I also found myself addressing her, from behind, as she walked ahead of me with earphones in her ears (which I couldn't see). When I reached her I said, with humour, "get those damn things out of your ears" and she responded, with equal humour, "oh sorry, I'm wired to a different planet." There seem to be two frontiers emerging into view here: the first is when I *assume* that my way of interaction will work, that people walk around with unplugged ears like old-fashioned I do; the second is when I realise that, whatever those two are listening to, it is not my music (classical) or my world (ancient?!). As our computers indicate, young people have their own 'favourites' – not only in music but also in websites, social networks, etc. – and they are not the same as mine. When my much younger colleague said: "I'm wired to a different planet," she was right; her world, upbringing, experience, pattern-of-life is totally different from mine and the first frontier I must cross is the bridge out of my own and the second frontier I must cross is the bridge into hers. The incarnational pattern is ever-evident: letting go *and* entering in.

It is worth lingering with *music* for the moment because, as a school-chaplain with more than a dozen years of experience said to me, the music with which young people engage affects them at depths I cannot even imagine. They are, he said, so aligned with the songs and lyrics of the musicians they listen to that there is a kind of conformity of them to it, a shaping of their own existences according to its contours. Young singers, close to them in age, put words on many of the issues that are important to them and form enormously how they see the world – sometimes for good, but of course in unhelpful ways too. But they *live* in the world of this music, called, on their MP3 players and 'favourites' websites, *my* music. And it isn't only their music that places them in a world very different from mine, it is the various media: the social networks (Facebook, Twitter), certain radio and TV stations, and so on; and all that is before even touching on such defining areas as magazines, fashion, jewellery. Through these the struggle for identity is both facilitated and imposed; and the key aim for these young persons is that they can fit somewhere, belong, find a bit of security, because so much in their lives offers them the very opposite.

The very opposite: yes. School chaplains have told me that in the field of relationships, home relationships for example, today's young people are subjected to tremendous insecurities. Many come from homes where the marriages have failed, so that they are shuttled between two separated parents and often have to deal with two additional step-parents, usually living with one of these under the same roof. The message they have received is that human love is unsure, that it cannot be trusted to last. Paradoxically, this leads to a tremendous need to connect – amid a tremendous insecurity in the matter of connecting and building relationships. 'Friends' can be everything; and great energies are devoted to acquiring and holding on to them. Having a couple of hundred Facebook friends is common, I'm told: connection, connection, connection.....but always via a medium; getting closer more *distantly*.¹⁸ Present-day students have told me that, in

¹⁸ The reverse can occur too, when connections *have been* made, as when young people bind together too tightly in a physical – indeed frequently in a sexual – sense, but without the accompanying personal closeness. This can occur

boy-girl relationships, initial approaches are now made by computer, never directly, never ever in embodied, face-to-face contact. Young people are immersed in this pattern; it is their world; and mostly they swim in its current(s). And they keep busy, active, engaged, so that apertures for reflection do not pop open and suggest the precariousness of it all – as happened with one perceptive 16-year old Slovak girl who said, just after her number of Facebook friends climbed over the 300 mark: “I wonder how many – if any – of them would come to see me if I were sick in hospital.” In relationships, embodied presence has been replaced by virtual presence: e-mail and instant-messaging, Facebook, the mobile phone. We now have text-symbols [☺, lol, xx] for smiles, laughs and kisses, things that were once seen and heard and touched. Eating *food* has lost its relational immediacy too, since a combination of microwaves and packed schedules ensures hot food for family members at *any* time – at any time but the *same* time, that is. All this takes its toll; it is the reality *par excellence* of young people, leaving them unattuned to other possibilities.

Some Brief Concluding Reflections

All I’ve been doing here is pointing to things that are obvious enough. I have said very little so far about the breakdown of social institutions – economic, political, religious – and the rising insecurity and fear that have resulted from this. Some chaplains in fee-paying schools in my own country (Ireland) have told me of the trauma to students of being taken from familiar school-surroundings with networks of teachers and friends known for many years and being placed in schools where they know no one and for the ethos of which they are quite unprepared. These days, not even the wealthy escape. Such experiences are seriously de-stabilising in an already unstable world. And the same world does not seem to offer any firm values any more, but rather a huge ‘smorgasbord’ of choices and possibilities to be chosen just according to taste because there is nothing deeper on hand to guide the selecting. Go for it if you like it, if it’s you, if it fits; you can always change it anyway – nothing is fixed or definitive! The big word for this kind of thinking is relativism, a phenomenon about which Benedict XVI has had much to say. It is today’s ‘cultural soup’; but how do you cross from its unnourishing ‘thinness’ into something more solid? This is not easy to answer because this same ‘cultural soup’ that sits in the bowls of our students has arrived on our own menus too: we are in this culture and this culture is in us.

Will we fail to reach the students’ frontiers then? Is my message ultimately pessimistic? No! It is no bad thing that some of what they feel is what we feel also; that is part of the vision of incarnation that I presented at the start as the greatest frontier-crossing of all. We must know something of what it is like for them if we are to be more than instructors, good catechizers, coordinators of immersion programmes, and so on. We must ‘wear their smudge and share their

through insecurity and a fear of loss, as well as peer pressure, and lead not to their ‘getting closer more *distantly*’ (as above) but rather to their ‘getting more distant *closely*’. In each case, a kind of aloneness, even an alienation, is felt.

smell.¹⁹ Those other things are all good *means*; and I know you will come up with many more than I ever could when you share experience and best practice from your pastoral work in your own schools. However, there must be a *vision* underlying what you *do*; and this talk has sought to articulate one – not without reference to students’ and chaplains’ experience – by highlighting *the* Incarnation as the great frontier-crossing and then, with this as the ultimate pattern (of letting-go and entering-in), using what GC 35 said about frontiers, especially the new *kinds* of frontiers, to motivate a ministry of reconciliation, healing and binding-together on your part that listens to and understands your students’ experience and, from there, helps them in their task of relating to one another, their families, yourselves and God.

You have at your disposal, for this pastoral ministry, your self-emptying selves, reaching across frontiers to touch what is unfamiliar, aided by the *Spiritual Exercises* as a pedagogy that can lead your students (and you) to a genuine experience of God and drawing on wisdoms and practices from the vast treasury of Christian tradition that, if anchored in your hearts as well as your minds, will enable you, with the grace of God, to do infinitely more than you could ever ask or imagine.²⁰ In the end, of course, it is not so much about what you do as who you are. Faith is caught, not taught. You preach the gospel mainly by example – using words if necessary (Saint Francis). And the Incarnation will always be your foundation for frontier-crossing because it is the great Frontier-Crossing. Rooted in it, you can, with Christ, go everywhere, because there is no place he will not go, no frontier he will hesitate to cross. Anchored in him, you have nothing at all to fear; and, reaching out to your students from that place, you will help them to put down anchors themselves.

¹⁹ Words of the English poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, altered slightly (from the original “wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell”).

²⁰ See Ephesians 3:20.