'Our time is one of religious decline. The once enduring vitality of the 
religious is in decay. The masses have become either superstitious or gullible, 
or even indifferent to religion. Society's elites are agnostic or sceptical, and 
its political leaders are hypocrites. Youth is in open conflict with established 
society and with the authorities of the past. They experiment with Eastern 
religions and techniques of meditation. The greater part of mankind is 
affected by the decay of the times'. There is no doubt that Europe's religious 
landscape is in turmoil and will change dramatically in the coming decades. 
The differences between young and old are great, and clearly indicate a 
decline in the importance of traditional, institutional religion. Today even 
the core believers amongst the young have ideas and practices that differ 
fundamentally from those of the older generation and that are greatly at 
ods with official prescriptions.

However, the pessimistic description of culture and the state of religion 
that I opened with, actually comes from the Annals of the famous Roman 
historian Cornelius Tacitus. When he wrote these words, late in the first 
century AD, he was referring to the state of the ancient Hellenistic world at 
that time, almost two thousand years ago. Religion has been in one crisis or 
another in whichever era you choose to study, while young people all over 
the world experiment with ideas and practices that deviate from those 
prescribed by the official Churches. Religious socialisation is a risky 
enterprise from the very beginning. The young very often choose to go their 
own way. Very often this takes them in directions that their predecessors 
may regret or even deplore. Another couple of quotes, now from a famous
poem: 'Rarely does human worth rise through the branches' and 'from sweet seed may come forth bitter'. Parents and teachers know this from daily experience. Despite their best efforts, the young don't follow in their footsteps. These quotations are also from long ago. Their author is the 'poeta christianissimus', as Boccaccio honourably called him, Dante Alighieri, on his way from hell to paradise, 701 years ago.

It is a source of hope and comfort to know that we are not the first generation to find ourselves in trouble. However, our responsibilities and problems don't simply disappear when we relate them to the responsibilities and problems of other people in other times. Every era faces its own crisis. The crisis of today is a crisis of belongingness. In Europe, the numbers of Church members and churchgoers, as well as several others indicators of institutional religiosity, are in steady decline. 'What instruments we have agree' that religion as an institution is fading. Since the 1970s, the Netherlands, the country I live in, has taken the lead in this process. In 1945, 40 per cent of the Dutch population were Catholics. Today this percentage has halved, and by 2025 the figure will have fallen further to around 15 per cent. In 1945, 15 per cent of the people were not members of any Church. Today, the figure exceeds 60 per cent, and it is predicted to rise to 70 per cent by 2020. If we also take into consideration the fact that all across Europe, the younger generation scores substantially lower on almost every indicator of religious behaviour than older people, we can deduce that Dutch youth has reached the peak of secularisation. In the European Values Study of 1990, 53 per cent of Dutch youths were reported to be non-Church members. At that time, this was indeed the highest percentage in Western Europe. Churches are losing contact with the younger generation. In the years to come, the results of this mutual estrangement will become more and more visible in participation and opinion indexes. In each of the various countries of Europe, this process has taken a specific turn due to the different national histories. In countries such as Italy and Ireland, the Church can still count on a solid majority. But even in these countries, decline is setting in. As we will see, the outlook for religion in the Netherlands is actually more favourable in some respects than in many other countries, despite it being the country with the lowest rate of Church membership.

The pessimistic forecasts of contemporary sociologists and historians need to be taken seriously. Let us first try to understand what they mean. They view the decline of the Church as the latest phase in an ongoing process of secularisation. The Church is no longer the leading institution in Europe. It has very little influence left, whether it be in science, politics, social affairs, daily life, or in issues of life and death. People are educated and free; they can make their own decisions. They can no longer be manipulated
by fears and threats about a hereafter. They live their own lives for their own
sakes, in the here and now. The philosophers of enlightenment and
disenchantment, such as Arthur Schopenhauer and Max Weber, seem to
have been proved right in the end.

But there is more to life than can be grasped by a sociological theory on
secularisation. Firstly, at the very time when people are turning their backs
on Churches, there has been no growth in humanistic, agnostic or atheistic
institutions. These institutions are in crisis too. Democratic socialism, which
in the sixties was an inspiring political movement for many young people,
has lost its galvanising force. The several parties find it difficult to get across
the difference they make, especially when they are in government. The end
of ideology, announced by Daniel Bell in the 1950s, seems irrevocable.
Politics is nowadays a pragmatic way of balancing different interests.
Skepticism functions, as it did in Tacitus’ time, as an attitudinal alternative to
idealism. Secondly, at the very time when people are turning their backs on
Churches, re-enchantment is setting in. A New Age has been proclaimed,
and a rapidly and steadily growing number of people are becoming
interested in a cornucopia of religious products. Hymns, holy oils, books
and meditative techniques from all over the world are being bought and sold
in abundance, to enrich and spiritualise the homes we live in. Is this
enlightenment? What enlightenment? As François-Renée de Chateaubriand
put it in 1802, in Génie du christianisme: ‘When people do believe in nothing,
they are close to believing anything; they will have diviners where they once
had prophets, sortilege where they once had religious ceremonies and they
will open up the haunts of sorcerers when they close down the temples of
the Lord’. In the Netherlands, the secularised country par excellence, all kinds
of religions are prospering, while their adherents are dedicated and active.
The country is home to the leading experimental garden of religiosity in
Europe. It would take a book to describe its religious flora.

We live in paradoxical times. While the historians and the sociologists
tamp down the ground that God is buried under, biologists and
psychologists point to the genetic and neuropsychological basis of religion.
People cannot live without myths and rites. Even when religion is
sociologically invisible it is at the same time deeply rooted psychologically.
God won’t go away. In a very recent Dutch survey it was shown that there is
no difference in the occurrence of mystical and religious experiences
between Church members and non-Church members.

How should we understand this paradoxical situation? I think that the
main cultural process that has brought about this state of affairs can be
summed up as the fragmentation of self and culture. For many centuries,
cultures remained geographically bound. But today, you can find people
from all over the world living side by side in any European town. In the old
days, people’s selves were adapted to the one-dimensional world in which
they lived. Today the self is no longer taken for granted. Its has become a
problem that people have to solve themselves. There are no longer any
readymade solutions. People live their lives as multiple, dialogical selves
moving through flexible cultural environments. The self has become a
complex combination of bits and pieces from several cultures; culture is
scattered in several selves. Flexibility has become a requirement in all
domains of life.

People no longer have a job for life. In fact, young people don’t actually
like the idea of a job for life. Temping agencies are booming, and the young
are eager to join them. People want flexibility in their personal relationships
too. The age at which young people have their first sexual experience is
falling, whereas the average age at which people sanctify their relationships
in matrimony is steadily increasing. In fact, many are opting for new kinds
of provisional contracts to formalise their relationships. Meanwhile more
and more marriages are ending in divorce, mostly followed by remarriage.
In politics, people change their allegiances from party to party, while only a
very few – and a steadily decreasing number for that matter – actually want
to become party members. Our democracies tend to become democracies
of spectators. Even youth culture is no longer a clear-cut phenomenon.
Many youngsters prefer to surf on the edges of conflicting youth cultures
and not to submerge themselves in any particular one of them. They want
to be themselves, not just part of a subculture. In the seventies, if you had
asked a male punk ‘What is being a punk all about? How did you become
one?’, he would have told you at great length how he became a punk, about
what being a punk meant to him and what punk culture was all about. In
those days punks still lived in tribes. Recently I posed the same question to a
punk, adorned with chains and a genuine Mohawk haircut. His answer was:
‘No, I’m not a punk, I’m Pete!’ Then he told me that he had put together his
own outfit, and that only afterwards did he realise that it did happen to
resemble the clothes worn by those people popularly known as ‘ punks’. Even
where fashion and youth culture seem to mould the outfits and opinions of the young inch by inch, they still perceive themselves as self-
made and want to present themselves as such, with a personal name rather
than a generic one.

People invent or reinvent institutions or behavioural patterns to gain
some basic stability in an unstable world. ‘Subcultural style-surfing’ has
become a way of life. It seems a contradiction in terms to talk of ‘stabilising
instability’, but that’s exactly what people want to do. Earlier on I mentioned
temping agencies: a very intelligent institutional invention. Young people
prefer not to tie themselves to a fixed job. They want to be free. But they need to work to be able to live up to the standards of their subculture. The tempting agency has the answer: it stabilises their need for instability. In politics, the young prefer to support single-issue pressure groups, such as Amnesty International and Greenpeace, rather than political parties. In the field of religion, a consumerist attitude prevails: the young tend to make up their own religions. They take elements from various religions, constructing a personal necklace from all kinds of beads, both indigenous and exotic, held together by the thin thread of their biography. The young prefer to experience and experiment, in religion as with everything else. The idea of reincarnation is a typical example of post-modern religious reinvention. Traditionally within our Christian culture there has been widespread belief in the resurrection of the flesh. Today more and more people, even Christians, believe in reincarnation. Why? Why is this belief so popular? Technically, I would say that both beliefs are equally complicated and equally hard to prove scientifically. So there is no rational explanation for this change in attitude. But there is a cultural and emotional explanation. The Resurrection is connected with the Last Judgement, which will be handed down, once and for all, for each individual. It is a one-take affair, carved out of stone above the entrances of our churches, completely inflexible. By definition, reincarnation offers flexibility. It offers you another chance, eventually, over and over again. That's why it suits the spiritual identity of modern peoples. Faced with modernity and post-modernity, the Church falters. The children of the dark are more inventive and more alert: the tempting agency and the Internet offer new ways to bring people together. Pastoral care cannot simply reject them. New institutional inventions such as 'rent a priest' and 'hire a minister' are too easily ridiculed and dismissed. Pastoral care will soon have to become increasingly attuned to the needs of the individual. I do see the potential pitfalls in this, but we should also recognise the possibilities and the necessities. Yet there is some hope. Some days ago I learned that in the new habits of the Franciscan friars a pocket is sewed into the garment for the mobile telephone. And last week the Pope sent his first e-mail!

Whatever its merits, there is a tendency in several cultural domains, especially amongst the young, to construct provisional, revocable, temporary and individual patterns of home-spun ideas. Social scientists use words like 'bricolage', 'patchwork', 'zap culture' and 'meander culture' to characterise today's culture. We could call modern man a 'Meanderthal', always looking for new combinations; twisting and turning, always claiming to be master of his own life. But is the fact that people are making up their own religions, creating unique combinations of elements from different
traditions in their own minds, really such a new thing? I think not. The phenomenon of individualisation has already been documented long ago, ever since the beginnings of the Renaissance. Once again we see an old source foreshadowing a modern or even post-modern cultural process. As said the famous Roman emperor and stoic, Marcus Aurelius, said in his Meditations: ‘he who has seen present things, has seen all, both everything which has taken place from all eternity and everything which will be for time without end. [...] There is nothing new; all things are both familiar and short-lived’. But hidden in similarity there is always a difference. Individualism is no longer the privilege of a well-educated and well-to-do minority, as it was before. In our time it has become everybody’s responsibility to be an individual. This presents an opportunity for many, but a burden for others, who just pretend to be individuals or even collapse under the cultural burden of the age.

When I presented this characterisation of modern culture and youth culture in April this year at the CEEC congress in Rome, some Italian participants assured me that in Italy things are completely different. Directly after my lecture the congress went by bus to the Vatican to meet the Pope. On the way I saw a billboard that summarised my lecture in one sentence and in Italian. It read: CAMBIA LAVORO PRIMA CHE LUI CAMBI TE. That is: ‘Change your job before your job changes you’. Back in the congress hall I rephrased this slogan: change your religion before your religion changes you; change your husband before your husband changes you. Now they understood, and an old Italian father came to me after the discussion and assured me that he had recognised the Italian youth in my presentation.

This is the culture we are part of, whether we like it or not. I’m not saying that we have to accept it uncritically. It is full of paradoxes. Think of the many lookalikes you see in the street, all claiming originality. How original can we and should we be? Is modern youth culture nothing more than a complete and utter sham, albeit a fashionable one? Perhaps. But let whoever casts the first stone show caution. We cannot choose the times we live in, yet these times affect us all. And those of us who still live in the old, stable and predictable world have to be wary of the future, to look out for our children and grandchildren. The times they are a-changing.

The main question is whether Christianity is still credible, still a sensible option in these modern, or rather post-modern, times. As the Flemish exegete Peter Schmidt puts it in his wonderful book about the image of Christ throughout the centuries: ‘It really has become difficult to imagine that billions of galaxies, which are billions of years old, and stars that died as black holes millions of years ago, are attuned to the salvation of humankind. [...] Neither can we picture anything concrete when it is said that all of this
has been created in and through Christ'. Let me rephrase Schmidt's thesis in psychological and cultural terms. It really has become difficult to imagine that we, the people of this time, floating, temporarily and loosely organised multiple selves, lost in space in an ever-changing multicultural context, have a Father in heaven who cares for us, that He knows our names and calls to us personally, that He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to die for us, and to deliver us, multiple selves grasping in a multiple cultural context.

The facts show that Christianity remains an option for young people and that many of them are interested in religious issues. If you want to see this in practice, I suggest you visit Taizé, in the French department of Burgundy, situated in between Cluny and Cîteaux, where the roots of Western monastic life can be found. The Taizé monastery was founded by Frère Roger Schutz in 1940 as an ecumenical brotherhood. Since the sixties, young people from all over Europe have been drawn there. Thousands of them gather there each year to meet, to sing and to pray. Since 1977, in a number of major European cities, annual ecumenical meetings have been organised in December: last year for example, 80,000 young people gathered in Barcelona. When I visited Taizé, I was struck by the excitement and spontaneity of so many young people. It was like the exciting, sparkling atmosphere in the schoolyard when the school term finishes and the holidays begin. The services are held in a temporary church building, a huge extending hall. Young people don't feel at home in traditional, permanent, concrete buildings. Frère Schutz understands them very well and consciously rejected the idea of building a big new church. The tent-like construction of Taizé coordinates the uncoordinated religious feelings of today's youth: a multicoloured mass gathered around the small community of monks, wrapped in white habits. At the end of the season the monks stay, while the young people go off in all directions, sharing a memory. No one knows how important it will prove to be, and nobody knows how long they will share it. As far as I know, no research has been done into this phenomenon. My guess would be that the Taizé brethren would not support the idea of carrying out such research anyway. They share what they have with anyone who wants to share it. They do so unconditionally, without demands, and without expecting anything in return. They carefully organise a seemingly unorganised meeting place, providing the conditions for an unconditional encounter, using what Frère Schutz has called 'la dynamique du provisoire', that is, 'the dynamics of the provisional'.

Young people like to be part of a crowd: at pop concerts, in Taizé. Just think of the two million young people who visited Rome last year. The Pope, 'a superstar in his eighties' as a liberal Dutch newspaper described him, had to fly to be able to see the whole crowd. Young people like these
kinds of gatherings, that is, gatherings that leave them to be themselves. Gatherings where they can be invisible, hidden in a huge crowd. So the young are indeed attracted by religious symbols, but they keep their distance, hiding in crowds and hiding within themselves, the religiosity of many of them survives in the catacombs of the self, not daring to come out.

Let me illustrate this by referring to research my colleagues and I carried out into the prayer practices of modern youths, because prayer is ‘hot’. From previous, European research we know that when the interviewer introduces the word ‘God’, this has an intimidating effect on youngsters. When asked straight out whether they often pray to God, only 11 per cent of Dutch youths said yes, while 42 per cent of Dutch people over sixty did so. But when asked whether they have moments of prayer or contemplation, 61 per cent of youths answered affirmatively. And this time there was no substantial difference between this figure and the figure for the elderly (68 per cent). The same pattern is evident in every country in Europe. However, in our research, we asked young people an open-ended question on how they actually pray. Without any prompting 44 per cent of those questioned said their prayers have a direction and 68 per cent of them said their prayers were directed towards ‘God’. So, asking a question does not always produce the answer, whereas not asking the question sometimes does. The advice famously given by Polonius to his servant Reynaldo in Shakespeare’s Hamlet certainly applies here: ‘by indirections find directions out’. This is a very important piece of advice for modern educators. I will elaborate on this later.

Let me return to the prayer practices of Dutch youths. Prayer turned out to be a widespread and important individualised ritual for the young. While only 39 per cent of Dutch youths said that they were members of a Church, 82 per cent said that they prayed, at least sometimes. In the European studies I mentioned earlier, Dutch youths came at the bottom of a table of sixteen countries with regard to Church membership. However, they came in third place in terms of prayer, below only Ireland and Italy. So even in countries where institutional religion is in decline, many young people say that they pray. The prototypical prayer said by youths goes as follows: faced with negative problems affecting others, they ask or hope for something, or they meditate. They direct their prayers to God, looking for emotional relief. They do this at night, lying in bed, with their eyes closed and hands clasped. Several aspects of this praying practice can be found in traditional praying: most people pray when in trouble, most people pray to God and most ask for relief and for the strength to face life. However, both time and place are exceptional: young people preferably pray at night, in bed. Today’s busy and hectic lifestyles leave no time for silence and meditation. In bed, people are
finally on their own, and find an opportunity to reflect upon the day, alone and in silence. The paramount reality of everyday life is interrupted. In between active thought and deep sleep, brain activity declines to a mode of passive receptivity, which prepares one to ‘turn inwards’ and meditate upon the contradictions of daily life. Our findings on prayer can also be interpreted as showing an individualised, do-it-yourself form of confession. People use prayer to cope with feelings of guilt, grief, disappointment and deficiency. New resolutions and plans can be made. So prayer has an important psychological function in the construction of identity. As St Augustine said, it is not meant to instruct God but to construct oneself: ‘ut ipsa [referring to ‘mens’, that is, soul] construatur’ not ‘ut Deus instruatur’. We have to change ourselves, not God. In psychological terms, prayer can be described as a mechanism for making up an inventory of daily events, to give meaning to them and learn to accept the inevitable or to change what can be changed.

When we asked the young who this God was that they had mentioned, they used all sorts of words and metaphors. It seems that they constructed their own definitions on the spot. A Belgian panel study by Hutsebaut and Verhoeven found no correlation between the definitions of God that young people gave at the age of twelve, and those they gave at the age of fifteen. It seems that, like our respondents, they lack a common stock of words and metaphors. In a Dutch study, youngsters were unable to give answers to the well-known Vergote/Tamayo questionnaire on the image of God because they thought the items were no longer suitable to describe God. Traditional images of God have lost their credibility. Instead, young people prefer a vague and abstract, self-made representation of God. They devoutly practise the mission set out in ‘An American Prayer’ by rock star Jim Morrison: ‘Let’s reinvent the gods’.

For St Augustine, the construction of identity was of course the construction of a religious identity. I’m not suggesting that all of the young have this intention. Their prayer can be criticised from a religious point of view. But as personal meditation, straight from the heart, seeking contact, it is a sincere beginning and we should not ignore it. One of our respondents assessed these prayers as follows: ‘I pray to God, in whom I don’t believe, to help my friend who believes that He will help him, if He exists’. This is really post-modern praying. Oliviero Toscani, designer of the Benetton ad campaigns, recently edited a small prayer book that was published in a number of different languages. His job involves capturing the spirit of the times. The book contains the prayers of young people from all over the world. These prayers are sincere, coming straight from the heart. But the God to whom the young pray is mysterious, rather absent and seldom
viewed as a father. As the Dutch writer Frans Kellendonk expressed it, God fills an emptiness they experience. But they have trouble finding the words to describe their feelings. The French journal *Esprit* described the religious situation of our times as ‘les temps des religions sans Dieu’, the age of religions without God. The formulation is negative and in plural. Perhaps it largely explains why Buddhism is gaining such popularity in Western society. However, in a book on Christian mysticism, Bruno Borchert stressed the religious dimension to today’s atheism: ‘It does not arise out of scepticism and indifference but out of a loss of faith in old images and an inability to find new ones. This lack of contact with God can prove to be a good breeding ground for a fresh form of mysticism’.

The French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger recently characterised modern believers as pilgrims. Their worship is voluntary, autonomous, temporary, individual, mobile and occasional. Traditional believers on the other hand worship out of a sense of duty, at fixed times and places, in groups and regularly. The American psychologist Daniel Batson described the modern believer as a seeker, a ‘quest-believer’, while he characterised the traditional believer as an ‘intrinsic believer’. In his remarkable essay ‘Credo di credere’, ‘I believe that I believe’, the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo interprets the Christian message as a transcription of a weak ontology. In fact, he recovered the faith he had as a youth, once this faith had been purified by secularisation and was no longer based on strict convictions.

In summary, we can say that the young include more believers than ‘belongers’, more quest-believers than intrinsic believers, that they tend to subscribe to a weak ontology, hesitantly moving to an uncertain point X, a metaphor that Vattimo borrows from, of all people, Nietzsche. The young are eager to believe but evidently reluctant to belong. They want to search, but are they ready to find and engage themselves? Well, there is the rub. Batson, arguing from a psychological point of view, sees the quest-believer as being more tolerant, more open-minded and more social-minded. ‘Quest is best’ is his famous conclusion. Psychologically, the older intrinsic ‘belongers’ seem to be at a disadvantage to the young. But sociologically the situation is reversed. In Batson’s words: ‘While at an individual level, intrinsic religiosity is not related to induced tolerance and increased sensitivity to the needs of others, religious institutions, primarily backed by intrinsic believers, really are concerned about the downtrodden in society and helping in several ways’. Young believers are reluctant to belong and their participation in societal and volunteer activities is low and inconsistent. Their contribution to the social capital of society is low. If this is just an effect of age, then we may expect a change in the long run. Once they grow older, they will start to participate. However, if this is a generational effect, and there are indications that it is, then the problem will get worse in the future.
Let me summarise, then conclude and thereby open the discussion. Firstly, as I have explained, God will not go away; the young are interested in religion. There really is a precious treasure within. But today’s religiosity is fragile and vulnerable. It certainly lacks the determination and militancy that the Catholic Church has exuded throughout the centuries, and occasionally still does. Peter Schmidt, the Flemish exegete I mentioned earlier, concludes his book on the image of Christ by stating that Christ has been as powerless for two centuries as he was during his life and on the cross. His image has been fragmented into bits and pieces, all over the world; he has become the icon of God’s absence. Christ is no longer the possession of one single Church or denomination. He unites people in their longing for meaning, their longing for God. Schmidt concludes that, even living in an emancipated world, it really is possible to believe, if one’s belief is based upon Christ’s original powerlessness. Schmidt’s vision bears out Vattimo’s philosophy of weak ontology. Both works eloquently summarise what we can learn from today’s young people. They don’t like power, history, institutions or grand narratives. They have no vested interest, just biography and themselves, just weak personal narratives. We can learn from their unselfish, critical attitude towards the Church as an institution. Church history shows several examples of very debatable policy; and the Church is also making history today. I’m not sure that the next generations will be positive about the Church politics of our days. So I really understand the young when they hesitate to join the club.

However, my second and concluding remark is: how can we help the young to connect their deep and genuine feelings with social and religious reality? How do we relate biography to history? I’m not here to provide the right answers, just (hopefully) to pose the right questions and to suggest some answers. And here they are. First of all, there is an enormous lack of religious knowledge amongst the young. Once again, this is a timeless phenomenon. In his well-known study on magic, Keith Thomas refers to a medieval survey on people’s religious knowledge. The results are shocking. When asked about the Trinity, one interviewee said: ‘I know the father and the son because I tend their sheep, but that third fellow I’ve never heard of’.

You may laugh, but try conducting the experiment yourselves, back home. Ask your own students what Easter is about or who St Paul is. Ask and prepare for a shock. One of my colleagues did so, and subsequently desperately advised God to let it rain for forty days and nights and then start all over again. As far as I know, God rejected the idea. It is our responsibility to instruct and inform the young. Schools and universities have a huge task ahead of them.
Secondly, knowledge is necessary, but is not enough in itself. It is very important for young people to develop personal relationships with teachers. One teacher can be sufficient. To my regret, hardly any research has been done on this subject. But we all know from our own experiences how important some of our old teachers were for our own biographies.

Thirdly, it is our task to captivate the young, not to capture them. Don’t try to imitate them. Be yourself and maintain a distance. Youth is, as Marcel Pagnol strikingly said, ‘un temps des secrets’, a time of secrecy. Anton van Duinkerken, once a famous Catholic and writer in the Netherlands, referred in his memoirs to an experience he once had at school. For several days, the class had been analysing an intricate love poem by a Dutch poet. Then one of the pupils asked the teacher whether the girl the poem was written for could actually have understood such a complex piece of work. Well, said the teacher, the poet was hoping that one day she would come and ask him about it. That, in a nutshell, is our role: to create interest and wait. Don’t push it: little plants grow by themselves. Just irrigate and wait. In education, so said the German writer Lichtenberg, nothing is more important than ‘das Ungefähr’. That is, it has to be done incidentally, not expressly; approximately, on a wing and a prayer. By providing the opportunity, as the brothers at Taizé do, using ‘la dynamique du provisoire’, finding out directions by inductions. And then, one day, they will come and ask you. It is indeed difficult for us to leave the young in peace. We desperately want to understand them. My stay in Taizé was short. The first time, since I study and observe youth, I felt like an intruder, remembering T.S. Eliot’s poem: ‘If you came this way, ... You would have to put off sense and notion. You are not here to verify, instruct yourself, inform curiosity; or carry report. You are here to kneel where prayer has been valid...’. I did the right thing and took the road to Cîteaux, to find my own peace...

Fourthly and finally, the Belgian cardinal Godfried Danneels recently spoke of the return of an old longing in people, the longing for beauty: ‘The introduction to the numerous models of beauty in churches, museums, music, literature and theatre is a path to God that is seldom followed’. I can speak from experience. Driven by a personal need, drying up in today’s rational, agnostic university system, I remembered an old school teacher from more than twenty years ago who had introduced me to Dante Alighieri’s Divina Commedia. For four years I sacrificed almost all of my free time in order to translate the first part, Hell. It was a hell of a job, but more than worthwhile. I found a companion for life and rediscovered my Christian roots. Now many people share my enthusiasm. I regularly lecture on Dante, and the Gregorian choir ‘Karolus Magnus’ I sing in have recently released a double CD La Divina Commedia Gregoriana (http://listen.to/karolus-
magnus). When I lecture and perform I notice many young people in the audience. I pretend not to see them and just do my thing, leading them from hell, through purgatory, to paradise. Paradise is far away and I'm in no hurry to get there. The same can be said of the young people. For the time being we are just on our way.