



The Holy See

CLOSING OF WORLD YOUTH DAY

HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II

Tor Vergata, Sunday 20 August 2000

1. "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (*Jn* 6:68).

Dear young people of the Fifteenth World Youth Day! These words of Peter, in his conversation with Christ at the end of the discourse on the "bread of life", affect us personally. In these days we have meditated on John's statement: "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (*Jn* 1:14). The evangelist has brought us back to the great mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God, the Son given to us through Mary "when the fullness of time had come" (*Gal* 4:4).

In his name I greet you all once more with great affection. I greet Cardinal Camillo Ruini, my Vicar for the Diocese of Rome and President of the Italian Episcopal Conference, and I thank him for his words at the beginning of this Mass. I also greet Cardinal James Francis Stafford, President of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, and the many Cardinals, Bishops and priests gathered here. With gratitude I extend respectful greetings to the President of Italy and the head of the Italian Government, as well as all the civil and religious Authorities who honour us with their presence.

2. We have reached the high point of World Youth Day. Yesterday evening, dear young people, we confirmed our faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God whom the Father sent, as the First Reading reminded us today, "to bring good tidings to the poor, ... to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound ... to comfort all who mourn" (*Is* 61:1-3).

In today's Eucharistic celebration, Jesus helps us to come to know a particular aspect of his mystery. In the Gospel, we listened to a part of his discourse in the synagogue at Capernaum after the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves. In it he reveals himself as the true bread of life, the

bread which has come down from heaven to give life to the world (cf. *Jn* 6:51). These are words that those who hear him do not understand. Their outlook is too material for them to grasp what Christ really means. They are thinking in terms of flesh, which “is of no avail” (*Jn* 6:63). Jesus’s words, instead, have to do with the unlimited horizons of the spirit: “The words that I have spoken to you – he insists – are spirit and life” (*ibid.*).

But his hearers are hesitant: “This is a hard saying, who can listen to it?” (*Jn* 6:60). They consider themselves to be persons of common sense, with their feet on the ground. For this reason they shake their heads and go away muttering, one after another. The initial crowd gradually grows smaller. At the end, only the tiny group of his most faithful disciples remains. But with regard to the “bread of life” Jesus is not prepared to back down. Rather, he is ready to lose even those closest to him: “Will you also go away?” (*Jn* 6:67).

3. “Will you also?” Christ’s question cuts across the centuries and comes down to us; it challenges us personally and calls for a decision. What is our answer? Dear young people, if we are here today, it is because we identify with the Apostle Peter’s reply: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (*Jn* 6:68).

Around you, you hear all kinds of words. But only Christ speaks words that stand the test of time and remain for all eternity. The time of life that you are living calls for decisive choices on your part: decisions about the direction of your studies, about work, about your role in society and in the Church. It is important to realize that among the many questions surfacing in your minds, the decisive ones are not about “what”. The basic question is “who”: “who” am I to go to, “who” am I to follow, “to whom” should I entrust my life?

You are thinking about love and the choices it entails, and I imagine that you agree: what is really important in life is the choice of the person who will share it with you. But be careful! Every human person has inevitable limits: even in the most successful of marriages there is always a certain amount of disappointment. So then, dear friends, does not this confirm what we heard the Apostle Peter say? Every human being finds himself sooner or later saying what he said: “To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life”. Only Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God and of Mary, the eternal Word of the Father born two thousand years ago at Bethlehem in Judaea, is capable of satisfying the deepest aspirations of the human heart.

In Peter’s question: “To whom shall we go?” the answer regarding the path to follow is already given. It is the path that leads to Christ. And it is possible to meet the divine Master personally: he is in fact truly present on the altar in the reality of his Body and Blood. In the Eucharistic Sacrifice, we can enter into contact with the person of Jesus in a way that is mysterious but real, drinking at the inexhaustible fountain that is his life as the Risen Lord.

4. This is the stupendous truth, dear friends: the Word, who took flesh two thousand years ago, is

present today in the Eucharist. That is why the year of the Great Jubilee, in which we are celebrating the mystery of the Incarnation, had to be an “intensely Eucharistic” year as well (cf. *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 55).

The Eucharist is the sacrament of the presence of Christ, who gives himself to us because he loves us. He loves each one of us in a unique and personal way in our practical daily lives: in our families, among our friends, at study and work, in rest and relaxation. He loves us when he fills our days with freshness, and also when, in times of suffering, he allows trials to weigh upon us: even in the most severe trials, he lets us hear his voice.

Yes, dear friends, Christ loves us and he loves us for ever! He loves us even when we disappoint him, when we fail to meet his expectations for us. He never fails to embrace us in his mercy. How can we not be grateful to this God who has redeemed us, going so far as to accept the foolishness of the Cross? To God who has come to be at our side and has stayed with us to the end?

5. To celebrate the Eucharist, “to eat his flesh and drink his blood”, means to accept the wisdom of the Cross and the path of service. It means that we signal our willingness to sacrifice ourselves for others, as Christ has done.

Our society desperately needs this sign, and young people need it even more so, tempted as they often are by the illusion of an easy and comfortable life, by drugs and pleasure-seeking, only to find themselves in a spiral of despair, meaninglessness and violence. It is urgent to change direction and to turn to Christ. This is the way of justice, solidarity and commitment to building a society and a future worthy of the human person.

This is our Eucharist, this is the answer that Christ wants from us, from you young people at the closing of your Jubilee. Jesus is no lover of half measures, and he does not hesitate to pursue us with the question: “Will you also go away?” In the presence of Christ, the Bread of Life, we too want to say today with Peter: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (*Jn* 6:68).

6. Dear friends, when you go back home, set the Eucharist at the centre of your personal life and community life: love the Eucharist, adore the Eucharist and celebrate it, especially on Sundays, the Lord’s Day. Live the Eucharist by testifying to God’s love for every person.

I entrust to you, dear friends, this greatest of God’s gifts to us who are pilgrims on the paths of time, but who bear in our hearts a thirst for eternity. May every community always have a priest to celebrate the Eucharist! I ask the Lord therefore to raise up from among you many holy vocations to the priesthood. Today as always the Church needs those who celebrate the Eucharistic Sacrifice with a pure heart. The world must not be deprived of the gentle and liberating presence of Christ living in the Eucharist!

You yourselves must be fervent witnesses to Christ's presence on the altar. Let the Eucharist mould your life and the life of the families you will form. Let it guide all life's choices. May the Eucharist, the true and living presence of the love of the Trinity, inspire in you ideals of solidarity, and may it lead you to live in communion with your brothers and sisters in every part of the world.

In a special way, may sharing in the Eucharist lead to a new flourishing of vocations to the religious life. In this way the Church will have fresh and generous energies for the great task of the new evangelization. If any of you, dear young men and women, hear the Lord's inner call to give yourselves completely to him in order to love him "with an undivided heart" (cf. *1 Cor* 7:34), do not be held back by doubts or fears. Say "yes" with courage and without reserve, trusting him who is faithful to his promises. Did he not assure those who had left everything for his sake that they would have a hundredfold in this life and eternal life hereafter? (cf. *Mk* 10:29-30).

7. At the end of this World Youth Day, as I look at you now, at your young faces, at your genuine enthusiasm, from the depths of my heart I want to give thanks to God for the gift of youth, which continues to be present in the Church and in the world because of you.

Thank God for the World Youth Days! Thanks be to God for all the young people who have been involved in them in the past sixteen years! Many of them are now adults who continue to live their faith in their homes and work-places. I am sure, dear friends, that you too will be as good as those who preceded you. You will carry the proclamation of Christ into the new millennium. When you return home, do not grow lax. Reinforce and deepen your bond with the Christian communities to which you belong. From Rome, from the City of Peter and Paul, the Pope follows you with affection and, paraphrasing Saint Catherine of Siena's words, reminds you: "If you are what you should be, you will set the whole world ablaze!" (cf. *Letter* 368).

I look with confidence to this new humanity which you are now helping to prepare. I look to this Church which in every age is made youthful by the Spirit of Christ and today is made happy by your intentions and commitment. I look to the future and make my own the words of an ancient prayer, which sings the praise of the one gift of Jesus, the Eucharist and the Church:

"I give thanks to you, Father of us all,
for the life and the knowledge
which you have revealed to us through Jesus your servant.
To you be glory in every age!

Just as this bread now broken
was wheat scattered far and wide upon the hills
and, when harvested, became one bread,
so too let your Church be gathered into your kingdom
from the far ends of the earth...

You, O Lord almighty, have created the universe
to the glory of your name;
you have given people food
and drink for their comfort,
so that they may give you thanks;
but to us you have given a spiritual food and drink
and eternal life through your Son...
Glory be to you for ever!" (*Didache* 9:3-4; 10:3-4)

Amen.

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