



The Holy See

**LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE YOUNG PEOPLE OF ROME**

Dear Young People of Rome,

1. I am delighted to think again of the 12th World Youth Day which took place in Paris last August. It was an extraordinary spiritual experience, for which I give thanks to God. At the end of the Eucharistic celebration at Long-champ Racecourse, which brought that unforgettable meeting to a close, I made an appointment with the young people of the whole world for Rome in the summer of the Year 2000 for the Youth Jubilee.

You young people of Rome are now involved in this important event, which requires very careful organization, but first and foremost calls for spiritual preparation. The City Mission, now especially addressed to the world of youth, is meant to contribute to this task. Its title is "*Open the door to Christ your Saviour*". But to be able to proclaim and witness to Christ, you must know him and personally meet him.

Only those who have an intense, profound experience of him can speak effectively of him to others. Only those who regularly spend time with this divine Teacher can lead their brothers and sisters to him. He is the only person who can fully respond to the expectations of every human being.

You have certainly heard of him since you were small. But let me ask you a question: Have you really met him? In faith have you had a living experience of him as a loyal and faithful friend, or does his image still seem too far removed from your real problems to excite any interest?

Jesus is not only a great figure of the past, a teacher of life and morals. He is the risen Lord, the God who is close to every person, to whom we can speak and with whom we can experience the joy of friendship, hope in time of trouble and the certainty of a better future.

He holds each of you in high regard; he is ready to reveal to you the secret of a fully successful life and to stand beside you to help you make your city more human and united.

2. Dear young people, trust in Jesus Christ! Trust in him, like the boy mentioned in the Gospel story of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes (cf. Jn 6:1-13). The Evangelist John tells us that a great crowd was following Jesus. Seeing all those people, he asks the Apostle Philip: "How are we to buy bread so that these people may eat?". This was a challenging question: in those circumstances it was hard to find food to satisfy such an enormous number of people. The disciples rightly replied: "Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little". In fact, Jesus wanted to put their faith to the test. He was not relying on an adequate supply of material goods but on their generosity in offering the little they had.

Generosity: this sentiment welled up in the heart of a boy who came forward and offered five barley loaves and two fish. Too little, the disciples thought: "What are they among so many?". Jesus appreciated the gesture made by this boy your own age and, taking the loaves, he gave thanks and distributed them to the people, as he did with the fish. What human reason did not dare to hope became a reality with Jesus thanks to a young boy's generous heart.

3. This, young people of Rome, is the important task entrusted to you: like the boy in the Gospel, generously take the lead in a change that will mark your future, that of the Church in Rome and of the whole city. Prayer and contemplation, silence and personal asceticism will help you grow in faith and in the awareness of your apostolic duty. To do this, you must become conscious of what you possess, of your five loaves, your two fish, that is, of the resources of enthusiasm, courage and love that God has instilled in your hearts and in your hands, precious talents to be invested for others.

Rediscover the value of your person, where God's Spirit dwells as in a temple: learn to listen to the voice of the One who came to dwell in you through the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, to the voice of the "Paraclete" — as Jesus calls him (Jn 14:16,26) — of him who teaches and supports, defends and comforts, the soul's sweet Guest.

Thanks to the Holy Spirit, which dispels every fear from your heart and offers inner freedom, you will be able, especially during the City Mission, to impress on the city that "extra soul" of which my venerable Predecessor, the Servant of God Paul VI, used to speak, by making your contribution to realizing its full potential.

4. The Spirit awakens the desire for truth in every heart. The truth which sets us free is Christ, the only one who can say: "I am the truth" (Jn 14:6), and adds: "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (Jn 8:31-32).

Many of you are studying, others are already working or looking for a job. It is important that you

all become impassioned seekers of the truth and its fearless witnesses. Never resign yourselves to lies, falsehood or compromise! React strongly to those who attempt to ensnare your intelligence and lure your heart with messages and suggestions that make you slaves of consumerism, disordered sex and violence, to the point of being driven into the void of loneliness and the meanders of the culture of death. Detached from truth, every freedom becomes a new and more burdensome slavery.

5. *Free to love!* Dear young people, who does not want to love and to be loved? But to experience sincere love, you must open the door of your heart to Jesus and take the way he marked out with his own life: the way of self-giving. This is the secret to the success of any real call to love, particularly of that call born in a surprising way in an adolescent's heart which leads to marriage, the priesthood or the consecrated life.

When a young man or woman recognizes that authentic love is a precious treasure, they are also enabled to live their sexuality in accordance with the divine plan, rejecting the false models which are, unfortunately, all too frequently publicized and very widespread.

Of course, it is a demanding choice; but it is the only one that really makes us free and happy, because it fulfils the deep desire the Lord has instilled in every man and woman's inmost heart.

True freedom is found where Christ's Spirit dwells (cf. 2 Cor 3:17): this is the eternal youth *is* of the Gospel that renews persons, cultures and the world.

6. *Free to serve!* Service, especially to the poorest and the most marginalized, is one of the vocations that appeals most to your hearts.

The Gospel passage guiding our reflection tells of a hungry crowd: Jesus takes care of them. In our city too there are people who hunger for material food and perhaps, even more, for spiritual sustenance.

During my Pastoral Visits to parishes, the young and the old, families and immigrants often point out to me situations of social hardship, loneliness and neglect. So much material and spiritual poverty exists. Difficulties and problems are also visibly affecting the world of youth.

Jesus asks us not to lose heart and to fight against any form of degradation; he asks us to be fully committed to creating a civilization with a human face. As the examples of many holy people past and present show, it is already possible to weave a web of authentic relationships between people by loving and fostering life, by working constantly to ensure that every person is recognized as a child of God who is welcomed with love, whose growth is supported and whose rights are protected.

7. Life raises many questions, but one above all must be answered: *what sense is there in living and what awaits us after death?* This is a question which gives meaning to all existence. Perhaps some of your peers no longer wonder about it: they live in the present as if that were the whole of life. They passively abandon themselves to reality as if it were a vanishing dream, rather than strive to make values and lofty ideals more and more a reality.

Opening the door to Christ the Saviour means once again to set high goals in life. Do not be satisfied with commonplace experiences; give no credit to those who offer them to you. Have faith in life and open your hearts to Christ, the Life that overcomes death!

The risen Jesus becomes our food in the Eucharist and from that point introduces us into immortal life, guaranteeing that one day we will be able to achieve it to the full and for ever. This certitude gives us the courage to face every hardship and make life a gift without reserve for God and our neighbour. This is an extraordinary adventure; but we cannot bring it to conclusion by ourselves. This is why Jesus wanted the Church, his Mystical Body and the People of the New Covenant.

8. Young people of Rome, may you be able to recognize Christ present in the Church and offer her your talents and abilities symbolized in the barley loaves and fish. Many of you have been constructively involved with the Church in parishes, groups or movements. Others, after their First Communion or Confirmation, have no longer kept up a vital relationship with her; some feel she is distant or extraneous to their problems; they judge her severely and reject her teachings.

However, I can assure you that no one is a stranger in the Church. Indeed without you, she feels like a childless family. She needs you all, your presence, even your constructive criticism. Above all she needs you to take an active part in proclaiming the Gospel, with the style and liveliness typical of your age.

Young people of Rome, *love the Church* and accept the limitations of the people who comprise her. Find her heart and help her to be close to you! I say this to all who already belong to a community, association, movement or Church group; I also say it to those who do not attend. There is a place for everyone in the Church!

9. Young believers, I turn to you in particular. Be Christ's witnesses first among your peers. The risen Christ calls you to make a covenant with him and with one another, to give the city a more just, free and Christian order.

Be the protagonists of this covenant in your relations with other young people, in your families, in your neighbourhoods, at school and university, in places of work, sport and healthy entertainment. Bring hope and comfort where there is despair and suffering. May each of you make yourself available to accept and help those who would like to draw close to the faith and to the Church. May no one the Father has set on our path go astray!

The precise aim of the City Mission is to inspire in the baptized a strong spirit of welcome and a zeal for the new evangelization, so that Rome, more deeply enlivened by Gospel values, may be open to the whole world. The important ecclesial event will help you to find new forms of dialogue with everyone who is wondering about the meaning of life and their future. Assure them that Jesus does not say "no" to the authentic demands of the heart, but only a clear, loud "yes" to life, to love, to freedom, to peace and to hope. With him no goal is impossible and even a small act of generosity grows and can lead to great change.

As agents of a *unique "spiritual volunteer service"*, to those you meet you offer a personal experience of Jesus through listening to his Word, through silence and through prayer; also give life to religious initiatives at the ecumenical level, in music and in art, the language of the young. Broaden the horizons of your apostolate to include the needs of the Church's universal mission, bearing in mind the particular spiritual and civic role of Rome, the see of Peter's Successor.

10. Be missionaries of hope! Because of the availability of the young person mentioned in the Gospel passage, Jesus was able to feed an immense crowd. It will also be through the gifts and talents you have put entirely at his disposal that he will bring the work of salvation to fulfilment in this city of ours.

"Open the door to Christ your Saviour". Dear young people, may the title of the City Mission become your daily programme and incentive. Turn your gaze to Mary, Mother of the Church and Star of Evangelization. Her whole life tells you that nothing is impossible to God. By imitating her and constantly invoking her, you will be able, like her, to bring joy and love. Together with her, the young Virgin of Nazareth, you will learn to see daily life as the forge where the Lord calls you to realize his plan of salvation. Thanks to her motherly protection, you will never lack apostolic and missionary strength.

May God help and protect you! I accompany you with my affection and my prayers as I cordially impart a special Apostolic Blessing to each of you and to your families, as well as to your plans and good intentions.

*From the Vatican, 8 September 1997,
the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary*

IOANNES PAULUS PP. II

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