

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE BENEDICT XVI FOR THE TWENTY-SIXTH WORLD YOUTH DAY (2011)

“Planted and built up in Jesus Christ, firm in the faith” (cf. Col 2:7)

Dear Friends,

I often think back on the World Youth Day held in Sydney in 2008. There we had an experience of a great festival of faith in which the Spirit of God was actively at work, building deep communion among the participants who had come from all over the world. That gathering, like those on previous occasions, bore rich fruit in the lives of many young people and in the life of the whole Church. Now we are looking forward to the next World Youth Day, to be held in Madrid in August 2011. Back in 1989, several months before the historic fall of the Berlin Wall, this pilgrimage of young people halted in Spain, in Santiago de Compostela. Now, at a time when Europe greatly needs to rediscover its Christian roots, our meeting will take place in Madrid with the theme: “Planted and built up in Jesus Christ, firm in the faith” (cf. Col 2:7). I encourage you to take part in this event, which is so important for the Church in Europe and for the universal Church. I would like all young people – those who share our faith in Jesus Christ, but also those who are wavering or uncertain, or who do not believe in him – to share this experience, which can prove decisive for their lives. It is an experience of the Lord Jesus, risen and alive, and of his love for each of us.

1. At the source of your deepest aspirations

In every period of history, including our own, many young people experience a deep desire for personal relationships marked by truth and solidarity. Many of them yearn to build authentic friendships, to know true love, to start a family that will remain united, to achieve personal fulfilment and real security, all of which are the guarantee of a serene and happy future. In thinking of my own youth, I realize that stability and security are not the questions that most occupy the minds of young people. True enough, it is important to have a job and thus to have firm ground beneath our feet, yet the years of our youth are also a time when we are seeking to get the most out of life. When I think back on that time, I remember above all that we were not willing to settle for a conventional middle-class life. We wanted something great, something new. We wanted to discover life itself, in all its grandeur and beauty. Naturally, part of that was due to the times we lived in. During the Nazi dictatorship and the war, we were, so to speak, “hemmed in” by the dominant power structure. So we wanted to break out into the open, to experience the whole range of human possibilities. I think that, to some extent, this urge to break out of the ordinary is present in every generation. Part of being young is desiring something beyond everyday life and a secure job, a yearning for something really truly greater. Is this simply an empty dream that fades away as we become older? No! Men and women were created for something great, for infinity. Nothing else will ever be enough. Saint Augustine was right when he said “our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you”. The desire for a more meaningful life is a sign that God created us and that we bear his “imprint”. God is life, and that is why every creature reaches out towards life. Because human beings are made in the image of God, we do this in a unique and special way. We reach out for love, joy and peace. So we can see how absurd it is to think that we can truly live by removing God from the picture! God is the source of life. To set God aside is to separate ourselves from that source and, inevitably, to deprive ourselves of fulfilment and joy: “without the Creator, the creature fades into nothingness” (Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 36). In some parts of the world, particularly in the West, today’s culture tends to exclude God, and to consider faith a purely private issue with no relevance for the life of society. Even though the set of values underpinning society comes from the Gospel – values like the sense of the dignity of the person, of solidarity, of work and of the family –, we see a certain “eclipse of God” taking place, a kind of amnesia which, albeit not an outright rejection of Christianity, is nonetheless a denial of the treasure of our faith, a denial that could lead to the loss of our deepest identity.

For this reason, dear friends, I encourage you to strengthen your faith in God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. You are the future of society and of the Church! As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians of Colossae, it is vital to have roots, a solid foundation! This is particularly true today. Many people have no stable points of reference on which to build their lives, and so they end up deeply insecure. There is a growing mentality of relativism, which holds that everything is equally valid, that truth and absolute points of reference do not exist. But this way of thinking does not lead to true freedom, but rather to instability, confusion and blind conformity to the fads of the moment. As young people, you are entitled to receive from previous generations solid points of reference to help you to make choices and on which to build your lives: like a young plant which needs solid support until it can sink deep roots and become a sturdy tree capable of bearing fruit.

2. Planted and built up in Jesus Christ

In order to highlight the importance of faith in the lives of believers, I would like to reflect with you on each of the three terms used by Saint Paul in the expression: “Planted and built up in Jesus Christ, firm in the faith” (cf. Col 2:7). We can distinguish three images: “planted” calls to mind a tree and the roots that feed it; “built up” refers to the construction of a house; “firm” indicates growth in

physical or moral strength. These images are very eloquent. Before commenting on them, I would like to point out that grammatically all three terms in the original text are in the passive voice. This means that it is Christ himself who takes the initiative to plant, build up and confirm the faithful.

The first image is that of a tree which is firmly planted thanks to its roots, which keep it upright and give it nourishment. Without those roots, it would be blown away by the wind and would die. What are our roots? Naturally our parents, our families and the culture of our country are very important elements of our personal identity. But the Bible reveals a further element. The prophet Jeremiah wrote: "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit" (Jer 17:7-8). For the prophet, to send out roots means to put one's trust in God. From him we draw our life. Without him, we cannot truly live. "God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son" (1 Jn 5:11). Jesus himself tells us that he is our life (cf. Jn 14:6). Consequently, Christian faith is not only a matter of believing that certain things are true, but above all a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It is an encounter with the Son of God that gives new energy to the whole of our existence. When we enter into a personal relationship with him, Christ reveals our true identity and, in friendship with him, our life grows towards complete fulfilment. There is a moment, when we are young, when each of us wonders: what meaning does my life have? What purpose and direction should I give to it? This is a very important moment, and it can worry us, perhaps for some time. We start wondering about the kind of work we should take up, the kind of relationships we should establish, the friendships we should cultivate... Here, once more, I think of my own youth. I was somehow aware quite early on that the Lord wanted me to be a priest. Then later, after the war, when I was in the seminary and at university on the way towards that goal, I had to recapture that certainty. I had to ask myself: is this really the path I was meant to take? Is this really God's will for me? Will I be able to remain faithful to him and completely at his service? A decision like this demands a certain struggle. It cannot be otherwise. But then came the certainty: this is the right thing! Yes, the Lord wants me, and he will give me strength. If I listen to him and walk with him, I become truly myself. What counts is not the fulfilment of my desires, but of his will. In this way life becomes authentic.

Just as the roots of a tree keep it firmly planted in the soil, so the foundations of a house give it long-lasting stability. Through faith, we have been built up in Jesus Christ (cfr Col 2:7), even as a house is built on its foundations. Sacred history provides many examples of saints who built their lives on the word of God. The first is Abraham, our father in faith, who obeyed God when he was asked to leave his ancestral home and to set out for an unknown land. "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness, and he was called the friend of God" (Jas 2:23). Being built up in Jesus Christ means responding positively to God's call, trusting in him and putting his word into practice. Jesus himself reprimanded his disciples: "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord', and do not do what I tell you?" (Lk 6:46). He went on to use the image of building a house: "I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, listens to my words, and acts on them. That one is like a person building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when the flood came, the river burst against that house but could not shake it because it had been well built" (Lk 6:47-48).

Dear friends, build your own house on rock, just like the person who "dug deeply". Try each day to follow Christ's word. Listen to him as a true friend with whom you can share your path in life. With him at your side, you will find courage and hope to face difficulties and problems, and even to overcome disappointments and set-backs. You are constantly being offered easier choices, but you yourselves know that these are ultimately deceptive and cannot bring you serenity and joy. Only the word of God can show us the authentic way, and only the faith we have received is the light which shines on our path. Gratefully accept this spiritual gift which you have received from your families; strive to respond responsibly to God's call, and to grow in your faith. Do not believe those who tell you that you don't need others to build up your life! Find support in the faith of those who are dear to you, in the faith of the Church, and thank the Lord that you have received it and have made it your own!

3. Firm in the faith

You are "planted and built up in Jesus Christ, firm in the faith" (cf. Col 2:7). The Letter from which these words are taken was written by Saint Paul in order to respond to a specific need of the Christians in the city of Colossae. That community was threatened by the influence of certain cultural trends that were turning the faithful away from the Gospel. Our own cultural context, dear young people, is not unlike that of the ancient Colossians. Indeed, there is a strong current of secularist thought that aims to make God marginal in the lives of people and society by proposing and attempting to create a "paradise" without him. Yet experience tells us that a world without God becomes a "hell": filled with selfishness, broken families, hatred between individuals and nations, and a great deficit of love, joy and hope. On the other hand, wherever individuals and nations accept God's presence, worship him in truth and listen to his voice, then the civilization of love is being built, a civilization in which the dignity of all is respected, and communion increases, with all its benefits. Yet some Christians allow themselves to be seduced by secularism or attracted by religious currents that draw them away from faith in Jesus Christ. There are others who, while not yielding to these enticements, have simply allowed their faith to grow cold, with inevitable negative effects on their moral lives.

To those Christians influenced by ideas alien to the Gospel the Apostle Paul spoke of the power of Christ's death and resurrection. This mystery is the foundation of our lives and the centre of Christian faith. All philosophies that disregard it and consider it "foolishness" (1 Cor 1:23) reveal their limitations with respect to the great questions deep in the hearts of human beings. As the Successor of the Apostle Peter, I too want to confirm you in the faith (cf. Lk 22:32). We firmly believe that Jesus Christ offered himself on the Cross in order to give us his love. In his passion, he bore our sufferings, took upon himself our sins, obtained forgiveness for us and reconciled us with God the Father, opening for us the way to eternal life. Thus we were freed from the thing that most encumbers our lives: the slavery of sin. We can love everyone, even our enemies, and we can share this love with the poorest of our brothers and sisters and all those in difficulty.

Dear friends, the Cross often frightens us because it seems to be a denial of life. In fact, the opposite is true! It is God's "yes" to mankind, the supreme expression of his love and the source from which eternal life flows. Indeed, it is from Jesus' heart, pierced on the Cross, that this divine life streamed forth, ever accessible to those who raise their eyes towards the Crucified One. I can only urge you, then, to embrace the Cross of Jesus, the sign of God's love, as the source of new life. Apart from Jesus Christ risen from the dead, there can be no salvation! He alone can free the world from evil and bring about the growth of the Kingdom of justice, peace and love to which we all aspire.

4. Believing in Jesus Christ without having seen him

In the Gospel we find a description of the Apostle Thomas's experience of faith when he accepted the mystery of the Cross and resurrection of Christ. Thomas was one of the twelve Apostles. He followed Jesus and was an eyewitness of his healings and miracles. He listened to his words, and he experienced dismay at Jesus' death. That Easter evening when the Lord appeared to the disciples, Thomas was not present. When he was told that Jesus was alive and had shown himself, Thomas stated: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe" (Jn 20:25).

We too want to be able to see Jesus, to speak with him and to feel his presence even more powerfully. For many people today, it has become difficult to approach Jesus. There are so many images of Jesus in circulation which, while claiming to be scientific, detract from his greatness and the uniqueness of his person. That is why, after many years of study and reflection, I thought of sharing something of my own personal encounter with Jesus by writing a book. It was a way to help others see, hear and touch the Lord in whom God came to us in order to make himself known. Jesus himself, when he appeared again to his disciples a week later, said to Thomas: "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe" (Jn 20:27). We too can have tangible contact with Jesus and put our hand, so to speak, upon the signs of his Passion, the signs of his love. It is in the sacraments that he draws particularly near to us and gives himself to us. Dear young people, learn to "see" and to "meet" Jesus in the Eucharist, where he is present and close to us, and even becomes food for our journey. In the sacrament of Penance the Lord reveals his mercy and always grants us his forgiveness. Recognize and serve Jesus in the poor, the sick, and in our brothers and sisters who are in difficulty and in need of help.

Enter into a personal dialogue with Jesus Christ and cultivate it in faith. Get to know him better by reading the Gospels and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Converse with him in prayer, and place your trust in him. He will never betray that trust! "Faith is first of all a personal adherence of man to God. At the same time, and inseparably, it is a free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 150). Thus you will acquire a mature and solid faith, one which will not be based simply on religious sentiment or on a vague memory of the catechism you studied as a child. You will come to know God and to live authentically in union with him, like the Apostle Thomas who showed his firm faith in Jesus in the words: "My Lord and my God!".

5. Sustained by the faith of the Church, in order to be witnesses

Jesus said to Thomas: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (Jn 20:29). He was thinking of the path the Church was to follow, based on the faith of eyewitnesses: the Apostles. Thus we come to see that our personal faith in Christ, which comes into being through dialogue with him, is bound to the faith of the Church. We do not believe as isolated individuals, but rather, through Baptism, we are members of this great family; it is the faith professed by the Church which reinforces our personal faith. The Creed that we proclaim at Sunday Mass protects us from the danger of believing in a God other than the one revealed by Christ: "Each believer is thus a link in the great chain of believers. I cannot believe without being carried by the faith of others, and by my faith I help support others in the faith" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 166). Let us always thank the Lord for the gift of the Church, for the Church helps us to advance securely in the faith that gives us true life (cf. Jn 20:31).

In the history of the Church, the saints and the martyrs have always drawn from the glorious Cross of Christ the strength to be faithful to God even to the point of offering their own lives. In faith they found the strength to overcome their weaknesses and to prevail over every adversity. Indeed, as the Apostle John says, “Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 Jn 5:5). The victory born of faith is that of love. There have been, and still are, many Christians who are living witnesses of the power of faith that is expressed in charity. They have been peacemakers, promoters of justice and workers for a more humane world, a world in accordance with God’s plan. With competence and professionalism, they have been committed in different sectors of the life of society, contributing effectively to the welfare of all. The charity that comes from faith led them to offer concrete witness by their actions and words. Christ is not a treasure meant for us alone; he is the most precious treasure we have, one that is meant to be shared with others. In our age of globalization, be witnesses of Christian hope all over the world. How many people long to receive this hope! Standing before the tomb of his friend Lazarus, who had died four days earlier, as he was about to call the dead man back to life, Jesus said to Lazarus’ sister Martha: “If you believe, you will see the glory of God” (cf. Jn 11:40). In the same way, if you believe, and if you are able to live out your faith and bear witness to it every day, you will become a means of helping other young people like yourselves to find the meaning and joy of life, which is born of an encounter with Christ!

6. On the way to World Youth Day in Madrid

Dear friends, once again I invite you to attend World Youth Day in Madrid. I await each of you with great joy. Jesus Christ wishes to make you firm in faith through the Church. The decision to believe in Jesus Christ and to follow him is not an easy one. It is hindered by our personal failures and by the many voices that point us towards easier paths. Do not be discouraged. Rather, look for the support of the Christian community, the support of the Church! Throughout this year, carefully prepare for the meeting in Madrid with the bishops, priests and youth leaders in your dioceses, parish communities, associations and movements. The quality of our meeting will depend above all on our spiritual preparation, our prayer, our common hearing of the word of God and our mutual support.

Dear young people, the Church depends on you! She needs your lively faith, your creative charity and the energy of your hope. Your presence renews, rejuvenates and gives new energy to the Church. That is why World Youth Days are a grace, not only for you, but for the entire People of God. The Church in Spain is actively preparing to welcome you and to share this joyful experience of faith with you. I thank the dioceses, parishes, shrines, religious communities, ecclesial associations and movements, and all who are hard at work in preparing for this event. The Lord will not fail to grant them his blessings. May the Virgin Mary accompany you along this path of preparation. At the message of the angel, she received God’s word with faith. It was in faith that she consented to what God was accomplishing in her. By proclaiming her “fiat”, her “yes”, she received the gift of immense charity which led her to give herself entirely to God. May she intercede for each one of you so that, in the coming World Youth Day you may grow in faith and love. I assure you of a paternal remembrance in my prayers and I give you my heartfelt blessing.

From the Vatican, 6 August 2010, Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord.

BENEDICTUS PP. XVI

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