



The Holy See

MEETING WITH THE YOUNG PEOPLE FROM THE DIOCESE OF ROME

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II

Thursday, 25 March 1999

First Question

Your Holiness, in your Message for World Youth Day 1999, you invited us, together with the whole Church, "to turn towards God the Father and to listen with gratitude and wonder to Jesus' astonishing revelation: "The Father loves you!", and again you assured us: "His love will never leave you, his covenant of peace with you will never be lacking". We are sure of this. However at times we find it difficult to understand how the Father loves us, when we are faced with the suffering and death of young people like us, when natural catastrophes affect innocent people, when - even worse - man experiences the madness of war. We are, in fact, ending a century which has been deeply marked by wars and hatred between peoples. Even today, particularly in these hours, war and hatred continue in areas so close to us in the former Yugoslavia. Your Holiness, can you help us to understand how the Father never ceases to love us even when we see the suffering of the just and the innocent, when many of our peers are overcome by destructive phenomena such as drug dependency, and when man takes his life because of hatred and war?

Dear Young People,

Welcome to the Vatican, to Paul VI Auditorium. I welcome those present here in the hall and those who are outside in the rain, which however does not seem to be very heavy. They are, in any case, stronger than the rain.

Dear Young People,

1. The great problem you place before me is rooted in the very heart of man. In the question that your representative asked me I hear the echo of a strong objection that we read in Dostoevsky's "*Story of the Grand Inquisitor*": "How can I believe in God when he permits the death of an innocent child?". We experience and almost see with our own eyes the problem of evil in our everyday life. The great discussions of this problem do not seem immediately convincing, especially

when we ourselves experience illness or suffering or when we are touched by the death of someone who is near and dear to us.

But I will not avoid the challenge this question contains. In the first place, though, I too would like to ask you a provocative question: you ask me how to understand the love of the Father when we find ourselves faced with hatred, division, the various ways of destroying personal dignity, and war. Rightly so, a short time ago you mentioned the conflict that is shedding blood in Yugoslavia and raising so much concern for its victims and for the consequences that may flow from it for Europe and the whole world. I sincerely hope that the arms may be silenced as soon as possible and that dialogue and negotiations may be resumed, so that with everyone's contribution a lasting and just peace in the entire Balkan region may be achieved.

For my part I say to you: why should you wonder where the love of God is and rather not emphasize the responsibilities that stem from human sin? Why, in short, do we blame God when instead it is men who are responsible through their free decisions?

Sin is not an abstract theory; rather, its consequences can be verified. The evil which you ask me to explain has sin as its basis and the refusal to live according to God's teaching. It wounds one's existence and leads to the rejection of what is good. We close ourselves then in envy, jealousy and selfishness, without realizing that such behaviour leads to loneliness and takes away the real meaning of life.

In spite of all this, you may be sure that God's love is never lacking, because God himself wanted to share his suffering and death with us. This is precisely what we must remember in this Lenten period and during Holy Week. And what was experienced by him was also saved and redeemed. Evil is conquered by the power of love, as the Apostle Paul stresses with full conviction: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Rom 8:35-37). This therefore is the way to triumph over evil: to grow in the love of the Father, who revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ.

Second Question

Holy Father, in your Message there is a strong invitation to repent and to frequent the sacrament of Confession. We ask you: from where should this desire for conversion come? Often we are told to repent, but sometimes we do not feel the need: can you explain why? Moreover, we ask you for a word on the sacrament of Confession, because it is not always easy for us to see it as the place where we can return to the Father from whom we have strayed through sin.

2. It is true that today, in general, the need for conversion is not felt like it used to be. In reality,

though, to question oneself is one of the basic requirements for achieving an adult and mature personality. It is only by a constant process of conversion and renewal that man makes progress on the difficult path of knowing himself, of controlling his will and of being able to avoid evil and do good.

In this way, we can say that life changes continuously. You have firsthand experience of this. Is it not true that when you love someone you do everything possible to win his or her love? Do you not sometimes change even those expressions and behaviour that you would never have thought you could change? If at the base of this there is not an act of love, it is impossible to understand the need for change. The same thing occurs in the life of the spirit, especially as a result of the sacrament of Reconciliation, which should be seen precisely in this perspective. It is, in fact, the effective sign of the mercy of God who reaches out to everyone, of the love of the Father who, in spite of the estrangement of his child and the squandering of his goods, is willing to welcome him back with open arms, to start all over again. In Confession, we experience first-hand the essence of God's love: he reaches out to us in the way that suits him best: that of absolution and mercy.

With this, I do not mean that the way of conversion is easy. Everyone knows how difficult it is to acknowledge one's mistakes. Indeed, we are ready to make many excuses rather than acknowledge them. In this way, however, we do not experience God's grace, his love that transforms and makes concrete what apparently seems impossible to obtain. Without God's grace, how can we enter into our inner selves and understand the need for conversion? It is grace that transforms our hearts, allowing us to feel God's love as near and concrete.

Do not forget, then, that no one is capable of forgiving others if he has not already had the experience of being forgiven. In this way, Confession appears as the high road to becoming truly free, by experiencing the compassion of Christ, the Church's forgiveness and reconciliation with our brethren.

Third Question

Your Holiness, you recall to us the words of the First Letter of John: "Whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen". In other words, you teach us that acts of love, forgiveness, peace and solidarity towards our brethren have to arise from love of the Father. On this need to love and to forgive, we fully agree with you and we will commit ourselves to do so particularly as a sign of our conversion, as we pass through the Holy Door of the Year 2000. Some of us, however, find it difficult to see how the Church loves and forgives. Can you, a witness of forgiveness, who was even able to forgive the person who physically injured you, and who had the courage to ask forgiveness for the Church's sins, enlighten us on this very important question?

3. This third question also finds its answer in the light of love. With great sincerity, I would like to tell you that forgiveness is the last word spoken by those who truly love. Forgiveness is the highest sign of the capacity to love as God does, for he loves us and therefore constantly forgives us. In view of the Jubilee, now imminent, the appropriate occasion for asking forgiveness and indulgence, I wished that the Church, guided by the teaching of the Lord Jesus, should be the first to renew that journey of constant conversion that belongs to her, until the day when she will present herself before the Lord. For this reason I wrote that, on the threshold of the third millennium, the Ecclesial Community should become "more fully conscious of the sinfulness of her children" (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 33).

The journey to the Holy Door is a real pilgrimage for those wanting to change their lives and to be converted to the Lord with their whole heart. When crossing that threshold, we must not forget the meaning it contains. The Holy Door is the entrance to the new life that Christ offers us. And life, as you know well, is not a theory, but something lived out at the practical level each day. Life is all the attitudes, words, behaviour and thoughts that involve us and make us see ourselves for what we are.

Dear young people of the Diocese of Rome, I thank you for your promise to me to be constantly engaged in being living signs of reconciliation and forgiveness. At your age you have many opportunities to bear a witness of sincere and generous friendship. Multiply these occasions, and joy, a gift of Christ's presence, will grow in you: a joy you are called to communicate and share with everyone you know. Jesus is the only Saviour of the world: he is the Life that gives real meaning to every person's life.

Dear young people, never tire of asking questions with legitimate curiosity and a desire to learn. It is right that at your age, as you step out into the world, you wish to know about new and interesting things. Maintain this desire to understand life; love life, a gift and mission that God entrusts to you to cooperate with him in the salvation of the world.

At the end of the meeting the Holy Father said:

Dear Young People,

1. At the end of this meeting, which has now become an annual appointment with the young people of the Diocese of Rome, I wish to thank you for actively participating in such large numbers.

I thank your representative, who greeted me at the beginning, and the friends who asked me - on behalf of you all - essential questions for being able to say "I believe": I believe, that is, that the Father loves me! And I again thank those who, in various ways, enlivened this afternoon of celebration and reflection. Special gratitude goes to Mrs Caterina Muntoni for her powerful

testimony of forgiveness that we heard a short while ago. We assure her of our closeness and prayer for her brother so cruelly killed, as we ask the Lord for the gift of many priestly vocations for the Church: people who, like Fr Graziano, know how to devote themselves with great generosity to the Gospel and to the service of their brethren.

2. Before turning to the Father with the prayer Jesus taught us, I wish to remind you of an important event and an important task.

Probably you already know the event I am referring to: it is the 15th World Youth Day, which will take place here in Rome from 15 to 20 August in the Year 2000 and will have as its theme: "*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us*" (Jn 1:14).

No one should miss this event which we consider a "time of grace" for young people. A time of grace for you and for your peers, whom you will have as guests in your homes, parishes, schools, religious institutes, camps and whatever else your imagination suggests. A time of grace for the Church of Rome: she will receive great spiritual and pastoral benefit from the presence of numerous young people, who will come here to share and bear witness to the faith at the start of the new millennium. I entrust you with a double task: on the one hand, that of extending an invitation to participate in the World Youth Day even to your young friends who may be indifferent to faith but who, precisely because they are young, are in search of truth and goodness. The Jubilee will also be an occasion of grace for them and, probably, as has already happened for others on similar occasions, a time for drawing near to Christ and to his Church.

I entrust your peers to you. I also entrust you with the task of generously welcoming those who will come from far away. I know how much the Diocese of Rome and the Italian Committee for World Youth Day are doing under the guidance of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, and I am delighted with the good work they have begun. But this work needs the participation and enthusiasm of everyone: priests, religious, adults and young people of the parish communities, the religious institutes, the university chaplaincies, the movements and associations of the Diocese. I hope that many families will open the doors of their homes to the world's young people, to allow them to get to know the big heart that Romans have. I am convinced that Roman young people will do no less than the French young people in Paris, than the Filipinos, than the Americans in Denver, than all the others, even the Polish young people at Czêstochowa. The word Roma, when read back to front, spells "Amor" ("Love"). May everyone experience this Roman "Amor"!

3. To prepare yourselves to welcome your peers who will arrive from many nations of the world, you must try to rediscover the many places of Christian holiness and spirituality that Rome possesses. You will thus be able to accompany your friends who will come, and together with them deepen your faith, handed down over the centuries by generations of believers who at times defended it and bore witness to it with the price of their blood. It is faith of yesterday, today and forever, which will go forward, also thanks to you, into the new millennium.

Today you have a happy coincidence in that the day for Roman young people falls on the Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord. I want to tell you that this solemnity, this mystery, opened the horizon for all humanity, because by the Annunciation God himself made his coming known, the coming of his Son, his entrance into human history, and so the Annunciation reminds us of this great opening of horizons in history, of the very destiny of humanity. It is good, therefore, that this solemnity coincided with your Roman gathering. One more word, the last. There is a precise reason for reciting the Angelus three times a day. It is not only a tradition, but it is a practice with deep roots. We recite the Angelus three times a day to recall the horizon that the Annunciation opens for us: "Angelus Domini nuntiavit Mariae, et Verbum caro factum est"; we recite it to remind us of the perspective in which we live. A perspective created by God himself, one which the Son of God made man entered. This is truly a source of great confidence. And you, young people, must be confident. For this reason I also say to you: try to recite the Angelus whenever you can.