



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER
TO THE YOUTH OF THE WORLD
ON THE OCCASION
OF THE XVI WORLD YOUTH DAY**

***“If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself
and take up his cross daily and follow me.” (Lk 9:23)***

My dear young people,

1. It is with great joy and affection that I keep this annual appointment with you, and as I write these words, my eyes and heart retain the evocative image of the great “Gateway” in the field at Tor Vergata in Rome. That evening of the 19 August last year at the start of the vigil of the 15th World Youth Day, hand in hand with five young people from the five continents, I crossed the threshold under the gaze of the crucified and risen Christ. In a way it was symbolic: I was entering into the third millennium accompanied by all of you.

Here I wish to express my most heartfelt gratitude to God for the gift of youthfulness that, through you, remains in the Church and the world (cf. *Homily at Tor Vergata*, 20 August 2000).

I also wish to give God fervent thanks for allowing me to accompany the youth of the world for the last two decades of the century that has just ended, showing them the way that leads to Christ, “the same yesterday and today and forever” (*Heb* 13:8). But, at the same time, I thank God because the young people have accompanied and almost supported the Pope during his apostolic pilgrimages around the world.

What was the 15th World Youth Day if not a special time to contemplate the mystery of the Word made flesh for our salvation? Was it not a wonderful occasion to celebrate and proclaim the faith of the Church, and to make plans for renewed Christian commitment, and together to focus on the world that is waiting to hear about the Word that saves? The true fruits of the Youth Jubilee can never be calculated by statistics, but only in works of love and justice, and in everyday faithfulness, so invaluable, yet often unseen. I have entrusted to you, dear young people, and especially to all those who took part in this memorable event, the task of offering the world this consistent evangelical witness.

2. Enriched by this wonderful experience, you returned to your homes and daily lives, and now you are preparing to

celebrate the 16th World Youth Day with your pastors in your dioceses.

For this occasion, I invite you to reflect on the conditions that Jesus asked of those who wanted to be his disciples: “*If anyone wishes to come after me*”, he said, “*he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me*”(Lk 9:23). Jesus is not a Messiah of triumph and power. In fact, he did not free Israel from Roman rule and he never assured it of political glory. As a true Servant of the Lord, he carried out his mission in solidarity, in service, and in the humiliation of death. He is the Messiah who did not fit into any mould and who came without fanfare, and who cannot be “understood” with the logic of success and power, the kind of logic often used by the world to verify its projects and actions.

Having come to carry out the will of the Father, Jesus remained faithful to it right to the end. He thus carried out his mission of salvation for all those who believe in him and love him, not in word, but in deed. Love is the condition for following him, but it is sacrifice that is the proof of that love (cf. Apostolic Letter *Salvifici doloris*, 17-18).

3. “*If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me*” (Lk 9:23). These words denote the radicality of a choice that does not allow for hesitation or second thoughts. It is a demanding requirement that unsettled even the disciples and that, throughout the ages, has held back many men and women from following Christ. But precisely this radicality has also produced admirable examples of sanctity and martyrdom that strengthened and confirmed the way of the Church. Even today these words are regarded as a stumbling block and folly (cf. *1 Cor* 1: 22-25). Yet they must be faced, because the path outlined by God for his Son is the path to be undertaken by the disciple who has decided to follow Jesus. There are not two paths, but only one: the one trodden by the Master. The disciple cannot invent a different way.

Jesus walks ahead of his followers and asks each one to do as he himself has done. He says: I have not come to be served, but to serve; so, whoever wants to be like me must be the servant of everyone. I have come to you as one who possesses nothing; for this reason, I can ask you to leave all riches behind which prevent you from entering the Kingdom of Heaven. I accept denial and rejection by most of my people; therefore I can ask you to accept denial and opposition from wherever it comes.

In other words, Jesus asks that we courageously choose the same path. We have to choose it from our hearts, because external situations do not depend on us. In so far as it is possible, the will to be as obedient as he was to the Father and to be ready to accept the plan which he has for each person right to the end depends upon each of us.

4. “*He must deny himself*”. To deny oneself is to give up one’s own plans that are often small and petty in order to accept God’s plan. This is the path of conversion, something indispensable in a Christian life, and that led Saint Paul to say, “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (*Gal* 2:20).

Jesus does not ask us to give up living, but to accept a newness and a fullness of life that only He can give. The human being has a deep-rooted tendency to “think only of self”, to regard one’s own person as the centre of interest and to see oneself as the standard against which to gauge everything. One who chooses to follow Christ, on the other hand, avoids being wrapped up in himself and does not evaluate things according to self interest. He looks on life in terms of gift and gratuitousness, not in terms of conquest and possession. Life in its fullness is only lived in self-giving, and that is the fruit

of the grace of Christ: an existence that is free and in communion with God and neighbour (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 24).

If to live as a follower of the Lord becomes the highest value, then all other values are given their rightful rank and importance. Whoever depends solely on worldly goods will end up by losing, even though there might seem to be an appearance of success. Death will find that person with an abundance of possessions but having lived a wasted life (cf. *Lk* 12:13-21). Therefore, the choice is between being and having, between a full life and an empty existence, between truth and falsehood.

5. *"Take up his cross daily and follow me"*. As the cross can be reduced to being an ornament, "to carry the cross" can become just a manner of speaking. In the teaching of Jesus, however, it does not imply the pre-eminence of mortification and denial. It does not refer primarily to the need to endure patiently the great and small tribulations of life, or, even less, to the exaltation of pain as a means of pleasing God. It is not suffering for its own sake that a Christian seeks, but love. When the cross is embraced it becomes a sign of love and of total self-giving. To carry it behind Christ means to be united with him in offering the greatest proof of love.

We cannot speak about the cross without considering God's love for us, the fact that God wishes to shower us with good things. With his invitation *"follow me"*, Jesus not only says again to his disciples: take me as your model, but also: share my life and my choices, and stake your life for love of God and for neighbour together with me. This is how Jesus opens up before us the *"way of life"*. Unfortunately, this is constantly being threatened by the *"way of death"*. Sin is this way that separates a person from God and neighbour and brings about division and undermines society from within.

The *"way of life"* continues and renews the mind of Christ in us and becomes the way of faith and conversion. It is indeed the way of the cross. It is the way that leads one to trust in him and his plan of salvation, and to believe that He died in order to show God's love for each one. It is the way to salvation in a society often divided, confused and contradictory. It is the way to the happiness found in following Christ right to the end, in the sometimes dramatic circumstances of daily life. It is the way that does not fear failure, difficulties, isolation, loneliness, because it fills our hearts with the presence of Jesus. It is the path of peace, self-control and a joyful heart.

6. My dear young people, do not think it strange that, at the beginning of the third millennium, the Pope once again directs you towards the Cross of Christ as the path of life and true happiness. The Church has always believed and proclaimed that only in the Cross of Christ is there salvation.

There is a widespread culture of the ephemeral that only attaches value to whatever is pleasing or beautiful, and it would like us to believe that it is necessary to remove the cross in order to be happy. The ideal presented is one of instant success, a fast career, sexuality separated from any sense of responsibility, and ultimately, an existence centred on self affirmation, often bereft of respect for others.

Open your eyes and observe well, my dear young people: this is not the road that leads to true life, but it is the path that sinks into death. Jesus said: *"Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it."* Jesus leaves us under no illusions: *"What profit is there for one to gain the whole world yet lose or forfeit himself?"* (*Lk* 9:24-25). With the truth of his words that sound hard but fill the heart with peace, Jesus reveals the secret of how to live

a true life (cf. *Talk to the young people of Rome*, 2 April 1998).

Therefore, do not be afraid to walk the way first trodden by the Lord. With your youthfulness, put your mark of hope and enthusiasm, so typical of your age, on the third millennium that is just beginning. If you allow the grace of God to work in you, and earnestly fulfill this commitment daily, you will make this new century a better time for everyone.

Mary the Mother of the Lord always walks with you. She was the first of the disciples, and she remained faithful at the foot of the Cross where Christ entrusted us to her motherly care. May this Apostolic Blessing that I impart with great affection be with you always.

From the Vatican, 14 February 2001.