



The Holy See

Dear Young People of the Diocese of Willemstad,

1. My journey to your local Church would be incomplete if I failed to share some reflections with you who are so close to the Pope's heart. I address these words to you in light of the questions which have been directed to me on your behalf. Your concerns all reflect your efforts to live the Christian vocation that is yours as members of Christ's Church, and I wish to encourage you in your quest and in your generosity. You may feel that you are geographically far from the centre of the Church in Rome, but I assure you that you are very close to the Pope's heart and affection. Most of your questions have to do with the obligations connected with the Christian state of life in marriage and the family or in the priesthood and religious life. You deeply feel the plight of the poor and you wonder if the Church could not do more for them. You are concerned about the gap that often exists between the way things should be and the way things are, between Christian teaching and the way Christians live, between the Good News of the Gospel and the harsh realities of life. How, you ask, are we to accept Church teaching on marriage in the midst of divorce and family problems? How can we feel called to the priesthood or religious life, including a life of celibacy, when we are surrounded by a consumer culture and a pervasive hedonism? In a word, how can we be faithful members of a Church that calls us to ideals that go against the dominant trends of contemporary culture?

2. In order to respond to these questions, something much more fundamental must first be asked: What is our relationship to Jesus Christ and what does it mean to be a disciple of Christ, a "Christian"?

At the beginning of the Gospel of Saint John we read a fascinating account of two young men who met Jesus and became his first disciples. They were Andrew and John himself. " Jesus turned and saw them following him and said to them, ' What are you looking for? ' ". Jesus asks you the same question: " Young people of the Netherlands Antilles, what are you truly looking for from life? " It is Jesus' way of putting before you the basic question of life's meaning and direction. Like young people everywhere, you want a life that is worth living. In young hearts you feel a powerful yearning for a world filled with goodness, with justice, with understanding and harmony between people and between nations. You want to live on the level of light and truth in human relations, and therefore of trust and genuine freedom.

Where will you find all this? Jesus said to Andrew and John: " ' Come and you will see ' . So they went and saw... and they stayed with him ". They stayed because they saw that with Jesus Christ they could aspire to what their hearts most desired. Not that Jesus offered simple solutions. On

the contrary, both Andrew and John would suffer much for his sake. But their meeting with Jesus made them realize that here they had the key to their existence; here they found the deepest meaning of life; they had found the way to give the highest value to their lives. The Second Vatican Council, in more universal terms, said it this way:

"Christ fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling".

3. Dear young people, this high calling which Christ reveals is also your calling: to be sharers in the divine nature, to be a new creation, to turn away from sin and to be restored in your likeness to God through the power of the Holy Spirit at work in you. Christ is your Saviour, your Redeemer. He alone is " your way, your truth and your life ". His way of salvation, however, is not what we might expect from a purely human way of thinking. The crucified and risen Lord does not promise you a perfect and comfortable life in this world. If you reflect on this you will realize that even people who enjoy an abundance of earthly pleasures, possessions and power often feel empty and unhappy. This cannot be the answer to the deepest longings of the human heart.

What Jesus does promise is that his victory over sin and death can also be your victory if in imitation of his Cross you consent to " lose your life " together with him, that is, to offer your life to the Father; to spend your life in love for others, even strangers, enemies and those who sin against you; to seek God's will and not your own in all things. This is what it means to be a new creation, to share in divine life, to be freed from sin and restored to the likeness of God so that here and now you may build his kingdom of peace, justice and love, and one day share eternal happiness with him in heaven.

4. It is only within this perspective of the total Christian vocation that you will find answers to the questions you ask about marriage and the family, or the priesthood and religious life. For in all things Christ is the pattern of Christian life and behaviour. Celibacy, for example, is meant to enable the priest or religious to imitate Christ's total self-giving for the sake of all. It frees a man or woman from exclusive affections and family ties in order that he or she may be totally dedicated to the service of God and of humanity. It is a special grace given to some, a sign of God's special love for those who have accepted a call to consecration or sacramental configuration with Christ. In this way celibacy constitutes a sign of the heavenly kingdom to come, in which people " neither marry nor are given in marriage ", and in which God is " everything to every one ".

Marriage too finds its full meaning in Christ. It is the sacrament in which a man and woman make an exclusive and unbreakable gift of self to each other out of love. Through their faithful love they continue the work of the first creation, cooperating with God in the task of bringing new life into the world. Their life-long communion becomes a sign of the perfect love that Christ the Bridegroom showed for his Bride the Church when he " gave himself up for her " on the Cross.

Perhaps you feel that you have known priests, religious, married couples and family members who have failed to live up to their high calling. Only God can judge the hearts of others; and we must not use their weaknesses and failures to excuse ourselves from the duties of our Christian calling. Where will we get the strength necessary to meet all the challenges that being a Christian involves? Andrew and John " stayed with him ", with Jesus. His company, his friendship, his divine love became the source of their transformation and fidelity. And at a certain moment Christ sent the Holy Spirit - " the giver of life " - upon the Apostles and they were filled with courage to take the

" Good News " to the ends of the earth. The same gift of the Holy Spirit is given to each follower of Christ, to enable us to live up to the standards that he sets us. God's grace builds on our human nature, so that we may " stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God ".

5. Your reflection on the Christian life must now go a step further. Whatever your vocation, how are you to know what is right and wrong when you make moral decisions? As followers of the crucified and risen Christ, your first question should not be " what do I want? ", but rather " what is God's will for me at this moment, in this situation? ". God's will is made known in Revelation and in its authentic interpretation and transmission by the Church. That law is also written in every person's heart and its highest expression is the perfect love of God and neighbour which Jesus demanded of his disciples and which the Holy Spirit pours forth into our hearts.

The same Holy Spirit continues to be present in his Church, helping her to apply the Gospel to moral questions, old and new. Hence, the Church's teaching is not just one voice among others, but a voice that speaks with Christ's authority. Our conscience, then, is not autonomous in deciding what is right and what is wrong. Consciences must be formed in the way of truth and love.

The eminent English Cardinal, John Henry Newman, who died a hundred years ago, wrote often and with great clarity on the question of conscience. In your Christian doctrine classes and discussions you may wish to reflect on these words of his:

"The rule and measure of duty is not utility, nor expedience, nor the happiness of the greatest number, not State convenience, nor fitness, order and the ' pulchrum '. Conscience is not a longsighted selfishness, nor a desire to be consistent with oneself; but it is a messenger from Him, who, both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by His representatives...

I am using the word 'conscience' ... not as a fancy or an opinion, but as a dutiful obedience to what claims to be a divine voice, speaking within us...

Conscience has rights because it has duties; but in this age, with a large portion of the public, it is the very right and freedom of conscience to dispense with conscience, to ignore a Lawgiver and Judge, to be independent of unseen obligations. It becomes a licence to take up any or no religion, to take up this or that and let it go again, to go to church, to go to chapel, to boast of being above all religions and to be an impartial critic of each of them. Conscience is a stern monitor, but in this century it has been superseded by a counterfeit, which the eighteen centuries prior to it never heard of, and could not have mistaken for it, if they had. It is the right of self-will ".

6. The Church has always held what Newman was proposing, that conscience is the interpreter, not the inventor, of the objective moral order established by God. That is why Pope Paul VI wrote in the important Encyclical: " *Humanae Vitae* ". " In the task of transmitting life, therefore, (husband and wife) are not free to proceed completely at will, as if they could determine in a wholly autonomous way the honest path to follow; but they must conform their activity to the creative intention of God, expressed in the very nature of marriage and of its acts, and manifested by the constant teaching of the Church ".

You have asked me to comment also on other aspects of the Church's teaching on human sexuality. During my pontificate I have given much time to a detailed analysis of the great gift of

sexuality which God has impressed in the very structure of the body. I have explained how man and woman carry on in the ` language of the body ` that dialogue which, according to Genesis 2:24-25, had its beginning on the day of creation.

The ` language of the body ` , as language of human beings, individual persons, is subject to the demands of truth, that is, to the objective moral norm.

I am sure that your parents and those who help them in your formation, especially your priests and catechists, will try to explain in more detail the richness of Catholic doctrine regarding marriage and the family. I exhort you to have the highest esteem for the ideals of chastity, marital fidelity, and self-control, so that in every way you will uphold the very great value of human love as God has wished it from the beginning. You are stewards of the many gifts of creation and redemption that God has given us. Through the exercise of a well-formed Christian conscience may you prove to be wise stewards of the master's goods both spiritual and material until his return.

7. Finally, let me say a word about the question which was raised concerning the Church's identification with the poor. The fact that the Church, following the example of Christ, expresses a love of preference for the poor means that you, as young Catholics, are challenged to work for the relief of those in need and the true liberation of those who are oppressed in any way. As well as engaging in the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, your intelligent commitment is needed in seeking those structural changes in society which can secure living conditions worthy of the human person. I implore you to start by adopting a new way of thinking: value a person, including yourself, not for what that person has but for what he or she is: a unique realization of God's creative love, the subject of an inalienable dignity and inalienable human rights! No situation or circumstances of poverty or abandonment can ever take away that dignity.

Then, as you take on greater responsibilities, strive to apply this " philosophy of being rather than having " in every area of your activity, and seek to make the whole of society more sensitive to the special needs of the poor and the weak, including the weakest of the weak: the unborn. Nor must you forget that the obligation to lead a simple life and to be detached from material things is an important part of Christian living.

What about material possessions? When it comes to the cultural, historical and artistic treasures of a nation or of the Church throughout the world, we are dealing with a spiritual as well as material heritage which belongs to everyone, both now and in the future. This heritage cannot be reduced to so many objects of commercial value to be bought and sold like any others. Although what is judged superfluous ought to be sold when the needs of the poor require it, we must not forget the words addressed to artists at the close of the Second Vatican Council: " Our world needs beauty so as not to sink into despair ". Through beautiful church buildings and works of religious art, the deep desire to confess the faith is made visible. The Church is not free to dispose of what has been entrusted to her down the centuries for the glory of God, the honour of Mary and the Saints, and the instruction and edification of each succeeding generation of Christian people. This is a treasure which in a sense belongs to the whole human family and which the Church feels obliged to preserve for posterity.

8. Dear young men and women, I pray that these brief reflections of mine on the occasion of my visit to the Diocese of Willemstad will increase your love for Christ and his Church, and will enable

you to live with perseverance and ever greater courage as responsible members of society. I also pray that many more of you will receive and heed a call from God to the priesthood or religious life in order to preach the Gospel and celebrate the sacraments, and bear witness in a special way to the new creation that we have all become through Baptism. To all of you and to your families I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

Willemstad, 13 May 1990.

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