



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II TO MEMBERS OF THE "ENCOUNTER COMMUNITY"

Friday, 20 October 2000

Dear Friends of the "Encounter Community"!

1. Welcome! I am pleased to receive you at this special audience and I greet you all with affection.

My thoughts turn first of all to the community's founder, dear Fr Pierino Gelmini, to whom I extend my cordial congratulations on the 50th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood, which he recently celebrated, and I thank him for the kind words he has just addressed to me on your behalf.

With him I greet the Bishops present, the priests, staff and volunteers who carry out their generous work in your community. I also greet the many authorities of every rank and level from various countries who have wished to honour us with their appreciated presence today. To each one I extend my respectful greetings. With the same sentiments I greet the parents, friends, relatives and support groups who have not wanted to miss this important Jubilee event.

But I embrace you with very special affection, dear young people who live in the "Encounter Community" centres and have set out on the path to spiritual and physical rebirth after the sad experience of drugs.

2. You have come on pilgrimage from many cities and nations to cross the threshold of the Holy Door; you have come to meet Christ and *resolutely reaffirm your intention to walk with him* towards a more peaceful and responsible future. Many of you have brought with you *the walking stick you carved* during the penitential season of Lent. It is a sign that recalls the spiritual support to lighten the effort of the journey. For you it symbolizes the interior pilgrimage you have undertaken, which must lead you to an ever richer life of faith, hope and love.

The Pope loves you and accompanies you with his prayers and constant remembrance. I gladly take this occasion to repeat to those of you here and to everyone in every part of the world who is involved in the struggle against drugs and for life: *the Church is with you and walks beside you!*

3. Dear young people, your spiritual family is called the "Encounter Community" because it arose from an important meeting in Piazza Navona 37 years ago. It seeks to offer those who have ended up in the blind alley of drugs the

possibility of finding the *path of hope*. The centres where you reside are a great help in this effort of personal recovery. They are places of brotherhood, where everyone is offered a second chance not to squander the precious gift of life.

Those of you who have been through the sad experience of drugs know quite well how it leads to loneliness, withdrawal and, at times, deep despair. In view of this tragedy, which affects the human person and his physical life itself, and represents a disturbing phenomenon in contemporary society, the Church has said repeatedly that *drugs are never a solution*. She intends to reaffirm this conviction forcefully in the face of opinions favouring the liberalization of narcotics or, at least, their partial legalization on the grounds that free access to these substances will help to limit or reduce their harm to individuals and to society.

4. *Drugs are not fought with drugs*. Those who unfortunately have found themselves caught in the tentacles of narcotics testify that this experience is an escape from themselves and from reality.

Drugs are often the consequence of an inner emptiness: they are a refusal, a renouncement and a loss of direction which often leads to despair. This is why *drugs are not overcome by drugs*, but *an extensive work of prevention* is needed to replace the culture of death with the culture of life. Young people and their families must be offered concrete reasons for commitment and must be given effective support with their daily problems.

Dear friends, you have discovered the true alternative to the many drugs that stupefy the human person in a community which, rather than proposing technical solutions, *offers a process of human and spiritual rebirth*. Fortunately there are many other structures in the world like yours, where many of your friends have had the good fortune to escape from the bottomless pit of drugs. I would like to offer my encouragement and cordial greeting to everyone who works in this sector.

They are a *valuable presence* which supports families tried by difficult hardships. The Church is grateful to all who render this skilled and unselfish *service to life and human dignity*.

5. Dear friends, I thank you for the two gifts that Fr Pierino has presented to me in your name: the opening of new centres in New York and Kazakhstan, and this beautiful statue of the risen Christ.

The risen Jesus shows you all that in him you can face the future with renewed confidence. He leads you to the heavenly Father's loving embrace. His mercy spurs you to continue on the path you have taken so that, reborn to life, you can make your contribution as protagonists to building a society free from every kind of drug. Take back to your communities the serenity I see on your faces today. May you always show the courage to rise again when you fall and to return quickly to the right path, even when this demands sacrifice and self-denial. Christ, the physician of souls, is your friend. He is the only Redeemer.

May Mary, whom you honour with the significant title of "Our Lady of the Smile", support you with her motherly intercession. May she welcome all who have died in recent years, victims of drugs and their consequences, and be close to the families scarred by this tragedy. May she accompany you all with her powerful protection.

With these sentiments, I assure you of my prayer and willingly impart a special Blessing to each of you and to your loved

ones.

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