

MESSAGE FOR THE TWENTY-SIXTH WORLD YOUTH DAY 2011

VATICAN CITY, 3 SEPTEMBER 2010 (VIS)

"Planted and built up in Jesus Christ, firm in the faith" is the title of the Message of Benedict XVI for the twenty-sixth World Youth Day, which is due to be celebrated in the Spanish capital Madrid during the month of August 2011.

The Message - dated from the Vatican on 6 August, Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord - has been published today. Paragraphs taken from the English-language version are given below. The Pope writes:

I often think back on the World Youth Day held in Sydney, Australia, 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, 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".

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. ... In thinking of my own youth, I realise 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. ... 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.

... Is this simply an empty dream that fades away as we become older? No! Men and women were created for something great, for infinity. ... 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.

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 St. Paul in the expression: "Planted and built up in Jesus Christ, firm in the faith". 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.

... The first image is that of a tree which is firmly planted thanks to its roots, which keep it upright and give it nourishment. ... 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". ... For the prophet, to send out roots means to put one's trust in God. From Him we draw our life. ... Jesus Himself tells us that He is our life. 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.

... 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. ... 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? ... 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, 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. ... Being built up in Jesus Christ means responding positively to God's call, trusting in Him and putting His Word into practice.

Dear friends, build your own house on rock. ... Try each day to follow Christ's Word. ... 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. ... 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". The Letter from which these words are taken was written by St. Paul in order to respond to a specific need of the Christians in the city of Colossae. ... 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 civilisation of love is being built, a civilisation 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.

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. ... I can only urge you, then, to embrace the Cross of Jesus, the sign of God's love, as the source of new life.

4. Believing in Jesus Christ without having seen Him

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.

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. Recognise 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! ... 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

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. ... 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.

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 globalisation, be witnesses of Christian hope all over the world. How many people long to receive this hope!

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.