

**MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER
BENEDICT XVI
TO THE YOUNG PEOPLE OF THE WORLD
ON THE OCCASION
OF THE TWENTY-FOURTH WORLD YOUTH DAY 2009**

“We have set our hope on the living God” (1 Tim 4:10)

My dear friends,

Next Palm Sunday we shall celebrate the twenty-fourth World Youth Day at the diocesan level. As we prepare for this annual event, I recall with deep gratitude to the Lord the meeting held in Sydney in July last year. It was a most memorable encounter, during which the Holy Spirit renewed the lives of countless young people who had come together from all over the world. The joy of celebration and spiritual enthusiasm experienced during those few days was an eloquent sign of the presence of the Spirit of Christ. Now we are journeying towards the international gathering due to take place in Madrid in 2011, which will have as its theme the words of the Apostle Paul: “Rooted and built up in Jesus Christ, firm in the faith” (cf. *Col 2:7*). As we look forward to that global youth meeting, let us undertake a path of preparation together. We take as our text for the year 2009 a saying of Saint Paul: “We have set our hope on the living God” (*1 Tim 4:10*), while in 2010 we will reflect on the question put to Jesus by the rich young man: “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (*Mk 10:17*)

Youth, a time of hope

In Sydney, our attention was focussed upon what the Holy Spirit is saying to believers today, and in particular to you, my dear young people. During the closing Mass, I urged you to let yourselves be shaped by him in order to be messengers of divine love, capable of building a future of hope for all humanity. The question of hope is truly central to our lives as human beings and our mission as Christians, especially in these times. We are all aware of the need for hope, not just any kind of hope, but a firm and reliable hope, as I wanted to emphasize in the Encyclical *Spe Salvi*. Youth is a special time of hope because it looks to the future with a whole range of expectations. When we are young we cherish ideals, dreams and plans. Youth is the time when decisive choices concerning the rest of our lives come to fruition. Perhaps this is why it is the time of life when fundamental questions assert themselves strongly: Why am I here on earth? What is the meaning of life? What will my life be like? And again: How can I attain happiness? Why is there suffering, illness and death? What lies beyond death? These are questions that become insistent when we are faced with obstacles that sometimes seem insurmountable: difficulties with studies, unemployment, family arguments, crises in friendships or in building good loving relationships, illness or disability, lack of adequate resources as a result of the present widespread economic and social crisis. We then ask ourselves: where can I obtain and how can I keep alive the flame of hope burning in my heart?

In search of “the great hope”

Experience shows that personal qualities and material goods are not enough to guarantee the hope which the human spirit is constantly seeking. As I wrote in the Encyclical *Spe Salvi*, politics, science, technology, economics and all other material resources are not of themselves sufficient to provide the *great hope* to which we all aspire. This hope “can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and who can bestow upon us what we, by ourselves, cannot attain” (no. 31). This is why one of the main consequences of ignoring God is the evident loss of direction that marks our societies, resulting in loneliness and violence, discontent and loss of confidence that can often lead to despair. The word of God issues a warning that is loud and clear: “Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord. They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes” (*Jer 17:5-6*).

The crisis of hope is more likely to affect the younger generations. In socio-cultural environments with few certainties, values or firm points of reference, they find themselves facing difficulties that seem beyond their strength. My dear young friends, I have in mind so many of your contemporaries who have been wounded by life. They often suffer from personal immaturity caused by dysfunctional family situations, by permissive and libertarian elements in their education, and by difficult and traumatic experience. For some – unfortunately a significant number – the almost unavoidable way out involves an alienating escape into dangerous and violent behaviour, dependence on drugs and alcohol, and many other such traps for the unwary. Yet, even for those who find themselves in difficult situations, having been led astray by bad role models, the desire for true love and authentic happiness is not extinguished. But how can we speak of this hope to those young people? We know that it is in God alone that a human person finds true fulfilment. The main task for us all is that of a new evangelization aimed at helping younger generations to rediscover the true face of God, who is Love. To you young people, who are in search of a firm hope, I address the very words that Saint Paul wrote to the persecuted Christians in Rome at that time: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (*Rom 15:13*). During this Jubilee Year dedicated to the Apostle of the Gentiles on the occasion of the two thousandth anniversary of his birth, let us learn from him how to become credible witnesses of Christian hope.

Saint Paul, witness of hope

When Paul found himself immersed in difficulties and trials of various kinds, he wrote to his faithful disciple Timothy: “We have set our hope on the living God” (*1 Tim 4:10*). How did this hope take root in him? In order to answer that question we must go back to his encounter with the Risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. At that time, Saul was a young person like you in his early twenties, a follower of the Law of Moses and determined to fight with every means, and even to kill those he regarded as God’s enemies (cf. *Acts 9:1*). While on his way to Damascus to arrest the followers of Christ, he was blinded by a mysterious light and he heard himself called by name: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He fell to the ground, and asked: “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (*Acts 9:3-5*). After that encounter, Paul’s life changed radically. He received Baptism and became

an Apostle of the Gospel. On the road to Damascus, he was inwardly transformed by the Divine Love he had met in the person of Jesus Christ. He would later write: “The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (*Gal 2:20*). From being a persecutor, he became a witness and a missionary. He founded Christian communities in Asia Minor and Greece, and travelled thousands of miles amid all kinds of perils, culminating in his martyrdom in Rome. All this for love of Christ.

The great hope is in Christ

For Paul, hope is not simply an ideal or sentiment, but a living person: Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Profoundly imbued with this certainty, he could write to Timothy: “We have set our hope on the living God” (*1 Tim 4:10*). The “living God” is the Risen Christ present in our world. He is the true hope: the Christ who lives with us and in us and who calls us to share in his eternal life. If we are not alone, if he is with us, even more, if he is our present and our future, why be afraid? A Christian’s hope is therefore to desire “the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ’s promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1817).

The way towards the great hope

Just as he once encountered the young Paul, Jesus also wants to encounter each one of you, my dear young people. Indeed, even before we desire it, such an encounter is ardently desired by Jesus Christ. But perhaps some of you might ask me: How can I meet him today? Or rather, in what way does he approach me? The Church teaches us that the desire to encounter the Lord is already a fruit of his grace. When we express our faith in prayer, we find him even in times of darkness because he offers himself to us. Persevering prayer opens the heart to receive him, as Saint Augustine explains: “Our Lord and God ... wants our desire to be exercised in prayer, thus enabling us to grasp what he is preparing to give” (*Letter 130:8,17*). Prayer is the gift of the Spirit that makes us men and women of hope, and our prayer keeps the world open to God (cf. *Spe Salvi*, 34).

Make space for prayer in your lives! To pray alone is good, although it is even more beautiful and fruitful to pray together, because the Lord assured us he would be present wherever two or three are gathered in his name (cf. *Mt 18:20*). There are many ways to become acquainted with him. There are experiences, groups and movements, encounters and courses in which to learn to pray and thus grow in the experience of faith. Take part in your parish liturgies and be abundantly nourished by the word of God and your active participation in the Sacraments. As you know, the summit and centre of the life and mission of every believer and every Christian community is the Eucharist, the sacrament of salvation in which Christ becomes present and gives his Body and Blood as spiritual food for eternal life. A truly ineffable mystery! It is around the Eucharist that the Church comes to birth and grows – that great family of Christians which we enter through Baptism, and in which we are constantly renewed through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The baptised, through Confirmation, are then confirmed in the Holy Spirit so as to live as authentic friends and witnesses of Christ. The Sacraments of Holy Orders and Matrimony enable them to accomplish

their apostolic duties in the Church and in the world. Finally, the Sacrament of the Sick grants us an experience of divine consolation in illness and suffering.

Acting in accordance with Christian hope

If you find your sustenance in Christ, my dear young people, and if you live profoundly in him as did the Apostle Paul, you will not be able to resist speaking about him and making him known and loved by many of your friends and contemporaries. Be his faithful disciples, and in that way you will be able to help form Christian communities that are filled with love, like those described in the *Acts of the Apostles*. The Church depends on you for this demanding mission. Do not be discouraged by the difficulties and trials you encounter. Be patient and persevering so as to overcome the natural youthful tendency to rush ahead and to want everything immediately.

My dear friends, follow the example of Paul and be witnesses to the Risen Christ! Make Christ known, among your own age group and beyond, to those who are in search of “the great hope” that would give meaning to their lives. If Jesus has become your hope, communicate this to others with your joy and your spiritual, apostolic and social engagement. Let Christ dwell within you, and having placed all your faith and trust in him, spread this hope around you. Make choices that demonstrate your faith. Show that you understand the risks of idolizing money, material goods, career and success, and do not allow yourselves to be attracted by these false illusions. Do not yield to the rationale of selfish interests. Cultivate love of neighbour and try to put yourselves and your human talents and professional abilities at the service of the common good and of truth, always prepared to “make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you” (*1 Pet 3:15*). True Christians are never sad, even if they have to face trials of various kinds, because the presence of Jesus is the secret of their joy and peace.

Mary, Mother of hope

May Saint Paul be your example on this path of apostolic life. He nourished his life of constant faith and hope by looking to Abraham, of whom he wrote in the Letter to the Romans: “Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become the father of many nations” (*Rom 4:18*). Following in the footsteps of the people of hope – composed of prophets and saints of every age – we continue to advance towards the fulfilment of the Kingdom, and on this spiritual path we are accompanied by the Virgin Mary, Mother of Hope. She who incarnated the hope of Israel, who gave the world its Saviour, and who remained at the foot of the Cross with steadfast hope, is our model and our support. Most of all, Mary intercedes for us and leads us through the darkness of our trials to the radiant dawn of an encounter with the Risen Christ. I would like to conclude this message, my dear young friends, with a beautiful and well-known prayer by Saint Bernard that was inspired by one of Mary’s titles, *Stella Maris*, Star of the Sea: “You who amid the constant upheavals of this life find yourself more often tossed about by storms than standing on firm ground, do not turn your eyes from the brightness of this Star, if you would not be overwhelmed by boisterous waves. If the winds of temptations rise, if you fall among the rocks of tribulations, look up at the Star, call on Mary ... In dangers, in distress, in perplexities, think on Mary, call on Mary ... Following her, you will never go astray; when you implore her aid, you will

never yield to despair; thinking on her, you will not err; under her patronage you will never wander; beneath her protection you will not fear; she being your guide, you will not weary; with her assistance, you will arrive safely in the port” (*Homilies in Praise of the Virgin Mother*, 2:17).

Mary, Star of the Sea, we ask you to guide the young people of the whole world to an encounter with your Divine Son Jesus. Be the celestial guardian of their fidelity to the Gospel and of their hope.

Dear young friends, be assured that I remember all of you every day in my prayers. I give my heartfelt blessing to you and to all who are dear to you.

From the Vatican, 22 February 2009

BENEDICTVS PP. XVI

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