

APOSTOLIC LETTER
DILECTI AMICI
OF POPE
JOHN PAUL II

TO THE YOUTH OF THE WORLD
ON THE OCCASION OF INTERNATIONAL YOUTH YEAR

March 31, 1985

Dear Friends,

Good wishes for International Youth Year

1. "Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you".(1)

This is the exhortation that I address to you young people at the beginning of the present year. 1985 has been proclaimed by the United Nations Organization International Youth Year, and this is of great significance, first of all for yourselves, and also for people of all ages-individuals, communities and the whole of society. It is of particular significance also for the Church, as the custodian of fundamental truths and values and at the same time as the minister of the eternal destinies that man the great human family have in God himself.

Since man is the fundamental and at the same time the daily way of the Church,(2) it is easy to understand why the Church attributes special importance to the period of youth as a key stage in the life of every human being. You young people are the ones who embody this youth: you are the youth of the nations and societies, the youth of every family and of all humanity; you are also the youth of the Church. We are all looking to you, for all of us, thanks to you, in a certain sense continually become young again. So your youth is not just your own property, your personal property or the property of a generation: it belongs to the whole of that space that every man traverses in his life's journey, and at the same time it is a special possession belonging to everyone. It is a possession of humanity itself.

In you there is hope, for you belong to the future, just as the future belongs to you. For hope is always linked to the future; it is the expectation of "future good things". As a Christian virtue, it is linked to the expectation of those eternal good things which God has promised to man in Jesus Christ.(3) And at the same time, this hope, as both a Christian and a human virtue, is the expectation of the good things which man will build, using the talents given him by Providence.

In this sense the future belongs to you young people, just as it once belonged to the generation of those who are now adults, and precisely together with them it has become the present reality. Responsibility for this present reality and for its shape and many different forms lies first of all

with adults. To you belongs responsibility for what will one day become reality together with yourselves, but which still lies in the future.

When we say that the future belongs to you, we are thinking in categories of human impermanence, which is always a journey towards the future. When we say that the future depends on you, we are thinking in ethical categories, according to the demands of moral responsibility, which requires us to attribute to man as a person-and to the communities and societies which are made up of persons-the fundamental value of human acts, resolves, undertaking and intentions.

This dimension is also a dimension proper to Christian and human hope. And in this dimension the first and principal wish that the Church expresses for you young people, through my lips, in this Year dedicated to Youth, is this: that you should "always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you".(4)

Christ speaks to young people

2. These words, once written by the Apostle Peter to the first generation of Christians, have a relationship with the whole of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Perhaps we shall see this relationship more clearly when we meditate upon Christ's conversation with the young man, recorded by the Evangelists.(5) Among the many texts of the Bible this is the one that especially deserves to be recalled at this point.

To the question: "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?", Jesus replies first with the question: "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone". Then he goes on: "You know the commandments: 'Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honour your father and mother'".(6) With these words Jesus reminds his questioner of some of the main commandments of the Decalogue.

But the conversation does not end here. For the young man declares: "Teacher, all these things I have observed from my youth". Then, writes the Evangelist, "Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said to him, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me'".(7)

At this point the atmosphere of the meeting changes. The Evangelist writes that "at that saying his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions".(8)

There are still other Gospel passages in which Jesus of Nazareth meets young people-particularly evocative are the two raisings from the dead: of the daughter of Jairus (9) and of the son of the widow of Nain (10)-but we can say without hesitation that the conversation mentioned above is the meeting which is the most complete and richest in content. It can also be said that this meeting has a more universal and timeless character, in other words that in a certain sense it holds good constantly and continually, throughout the centuries and generations. Christ speaks in this way to a young person, a boy or a girl; his conversation takes place in different parts of the

world, in the midst of the different nations, races and cultures. Each of you in this conversation is potentially the one he will speak to.

At the same time, all the elements of the description and all the words uttered in that conversation by both sides have a significance which is absolutely essential, and have a specific weight. One can say that these words contain a particularly profound truth about man in general, and, above all, the truth about youth. They are really important for young people.

Permit me therefore to link my reflections in the present Letter mainly to this meeting and this Gospel text. Perhaps in this way it will be easier for you to develop your own conversation with Christ—a conversation which is of fundamental and essential importance for a young person.

Youth is a special treasure

3. We shall begin from what we find at the end of the Gospel text. The young man goes away sorrowful, "for he had great possessions".

There is no doubt that this expression refers to the material possessions of which the young man was owner or heir. Perhaps this is the situation of some, but it is not typical. And therefore the Evangelist's words suggest another way of putting the matter: it is a question of the fact that youth is in itself (independently of any material goods) a special treasure of man, of a young man or woman, and most often it is lived by young people as a specific treasure. I say most often, but not always, not invariably, for in the world there is no lack of people who for various reasons do not experience youth as a treasure. We shall have to speak of this separately.

There are however reasons—and they are also objective reasons—for thinking of youth as a special treasure that a person experiences at this particular period of his or her life. It is a period which is certainly distinguished from the period of childhood (it is precisely the time when one leaves the years of childhood), just as it is also distinguished from the period of full maturity. For the period of youth is the time of a particularly intense discovery of the human "I" and of the properties and capacities connected with it. Before the inner gaze of the developing personality of the young man or woman, there is gradually and successively revealed that specific and in a sense unique and unrepeatable potentiality of a concrete humanity, in which there is as it were inscribed the whole plan of future life. Life presents itself as the carrying-out of that plan: as "self-fulfillment"

The question naturally deserves an explanation from many points of view; but to express it in a few words, one can say that the treasure which is youth reveals itself in precisely this shape or form. This is the treasure of discovering and at the same time of organizing, choosing, foreseeing and making the first personal decisions, decisions that will be important for the future in the strictly personal dimension of human existence. At the same time, these decisions are of considerable social importance. The young man in the Gospel was precisely in this existential phase, as we can deduce from the questions he asks in his conversation with Jesus. Therefore also the final words about "great possessions"—meaning wealth—can be understood precisely in this sense: the treasure which is youth itself.

But we must ask the question: does this treasure of youth necessarily alienate man from Christ? The Evangelist certainly does not say this: rather, an examination of the text leads us to a different conclusion. The decision to go away from Christ was definitively influenced only by external riches, what the young man possessed ("possessions"). Not by what he was! What he was, as precisely a young man-the interior treasure hidden in youth-had led him to Jesus. And it had also impelled him to ask those questions which in the clearest way concern the plan for the whole of life. What must I do? "What must I do to inherit eternal life?". What must I do so that my life may have full value and full meaning?

The youth of each one of you, dear friends, is a treasure that is manifested precisely in these questions. Man asks himself these questions throughout his life. But in the time of youth they are particularly urgent, indeed insistent. And it is good that this is so. These questions precisely show the dynamism of the development of the human personality, the dynamism which is proper to your age. You ask yourselves these questions sometimes with impatience, and at the same time you yourselves understand that the reply to them cannot be hurried or superficial the reply must have a specific and definitive weight. It is a question here of a reply that concerns the whole of life, that embraces the whole of human existence.

These essential questions are asked in a special way by those members of your generation whose lives have been weighed down since childhood by suffering: by some physical lack or defect, some handicap or limitation, or by a difficult family or social situation. If at the same time their minds develop normally, the question about the meaning and value of life becomes for them all the more essential and also particularly tragic, for from the very beginning the question is marked by the pain of existence. And how many such young people there are among the multitudes of young people all over the world! In the different nations and societies; in individual families! How many are forced from childhood to live in an institution or hospital, condemned to a certain passivity which can make them begin to feel that they are of no use to humanity!

So can we say that their youth too is a interior treasure? To whom should we put this question? To whom should they put this essential question? It seems that here Christ alone is the competent one to ask, the one whom no one can fully replace.

God is Love

4. Christ replies to the young man in the Gospel. He says: "No one is good but God alone". We have already heard what the young man had asked: "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?". How must I act so that my life will have meaning and value? We could translate his question into the language of our own times. In this context Christ's answer means this: only God is the ultimate basis of all values; only he gives the definitive meaning to our human existence.

Only God is good, which means this: in him and him alone all values have their first source and final completion; he is "the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end".(11) Only in him do values and their authenticity and definitive confirmation. Without him-without the reference to

God-the whole world of created values remains as it were suspended in an absolute vacuum. It also loses its transparency, its expressiveness. Evil is put forward as a good and good itself is rejected. Are we not shown this by the very experience of our own time, wherever God has been removed beyond the limits of evaluations, estimations and actions?

Why is God alone good? Because he is love. Christ gives this answer in the words of the Gospel, and above all by the witness of his own life and death: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son".(12) God is good precisely because he "is love".(13)

As we have said, the question about the value of life, about the meaning of life, forms part of the singular treasure of youth. It comes from the very heart of the riches and the anxieties linked with that plan for life that must be undertaken and carried out. Still more so, when youth is tested by personal suffering, or is profoundly aware of the suffering of others; when it experiences a powerful shock at the sight of the many kinds of evil that exist in the world; finally, when it comes face to face with the mystery of sin, of human iniquity (*mysterium iniquitatis*).⁽¹⁴⁾ Christ's reply is this: "Only God is good"; only God is love. This reply may seem difficult, but at the same time it is firm and it is true; it bears within itself the definitive solution. How I pray that you, my young friends, will hear Christ's reply in the most personal way possible; that you will and the interior path which enables you to grasp it, accept it and undertake its accomplishment!

Such is Christ in the conversation with the young man. Such is Christ in the conversation with each of you. When you say: "Good Teacher", he asks: "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone". And therefore: the fact that I am good bears witness to God. "He who has seen me has seen the Father".⁽¹⁵⁾ Thus speaks Christ, the teacher and friend, Christ crucified and risen: always the same yesterday and today and forever.⁽¹⁶⁾

This is the kernel, the essential point of the reply to these questions which you young people put to him through the treasure which is within you, which is rooted in your youth. Your youth opens different prospects before you; it offers you as a task the plan for the whole of your lives. Hence the question about values; hence the question about the meaning of life, about truth, about good and evil. When Christ in his reply to you tells you to refer all this to God, at the same time he shows you what the source and foundation of this is in yourselves. For each one of you is the image and likeness of God through the very act of creation.⁽¹⁷⁾ Precisely this image and likeness makes you put the questions that you must ask yourselves. These questions show how man without God cannot understand himself, and cannot even fulfill himself without God. Jesus Christ came into the world first of all in order to make each one of us aware of this. Without him this fundamental dimension of the truth about man would easily sink into obscurity. However, "the light has come into the world",⁽¹⁸⁾ "and the darkness has not overcome it".⁽¹⁹⁾

The question about eternal life

5. What must I do so that my life may have value, have meaning? This earnest question comes from the lips of the young man in the Gospel in the following form: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?". Is a person who puts the question in this form speaking a language still intelligible to the people of today? Are we not the generation whose horizon of existence is completely filled

by the world and temporal progress? We think primarily in earthly categories. If we go beyond the limits of our planet, we do so in order to launch interplanetary flights, transmit signals to the other planets and send cosmic probes in their direction.

All this has become the content of our modern civilization. Science together with technology has discovered in an incomparable way man's possibilities with regard to matter, and they have also succeeded in dominating the interior world of his thoughts, capacities, tendencies and passions.

But at the same time it is clear that, when we place ourselves in the presence of Christ, when he becomes the confidant of the questionings of our youth, we cannot put the question differently from how that young man put it: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?". Any other question about the meaning and value of our life would be, in the presence of Christ, insufficient and unessential.

For Christ is not only the "good teacher" who shows the paths of life on earth. He is the witness to that definitive destiny which the human person has in God himself. He is the witness to man's immortality. The Gospel which he proclaimed with his lips is definitively sealed by the Cross and the Resurrection in the Paschal Mystery. "Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him".(20) In his Resurrection Christ has also become the permanent "sign of contradiction"(21) before all programmes incapable of leading man beyond the frontier of death. Indeed at this frontier they silence all man's questionings about the value and meaning of life. In the face of all these programmes, the various ways of looking at the world and the various ideologies, Christ constantly repeats: "I am the resurrection and the life".(22)

And so, dear brothers and dear sisters, if you wish to talk to Christ and to accept all the truth of his testimony, you must on the one hand "love the world"-for God "so loved the world that he gave his only Son"(23)-and at the same time you must acquire interior detachment with regard to all this rich and fascinating reality that makes up "the world". You must make up your mind to ask the question about eternal life. For, the form of this world is passing away ",(24) and each of us is subject to this passing. Man is born with the prospect of the day of his death in the dimension of the visible world; at the same time, man, whose interior reason for existence is to go beyond himself, also bears within himself everything whereby he goes beyond the world.

Everything whereby man, in himself, goes beyond the world- though he is rooted in it-is explained by the image and likeness of God which is inscribed in humanity from the beginning. And everything whereby man goes beyond the world not only justifies the question about eternal life but in fact makes it indispensable. This is the question that people have long been asking themselves, not only in the sphere of Christianity but also outside it. You too must find the courage to ask it, like the young man in the Gospel. Christianity teaches us to understand temporal existence from the perspective of the Kingdom of God, from the perspective of eternal life. Without eternal life, temporal existence, however rich, however highly developed in all aspects, in the end brings man nothing other than the ineluctable necessity of death.

Now there is an opposition between youth and death. Death seems far distant from youth. And it is. But since youth means the plan for the whole of life-the plan drawn up in accordance with the criterion of meaning and value during youth too it is essential to ask the question about the end. Human experience left to itself says the same as Sacred Scripture: "It is appointed for men to die once".(25) The inspired writer adds: "And after that comes judgment".(26) And Christ says: "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die".(27) So ask Christ, like the young man in the Gospel: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?".

On morality and conscience

6. To this question Jesus replies: "You know the commandments", and he immediately lists these commandments, which form part of the Decalogue. Moses received them one day on Mount Sinai, at the moment of the Covenant of God with Israel. They were written on tablets of stone (28) and for every Israelite were the daily indication of the path to be taken.(29) The young man who speaks to Christ naturally knows by heart the commandments of the Decalogue; indeed, he can declare with joy: "All these things I have observed from my youth".(30)

We have to presuppose that in the dialogue which Christ develops with each one of you young people the same question is repeated: "Do you know the commandments?" It will be infallibly repeated, because the commandments form part of the Covenant between God and humanity. The commandments determine the essential bases of behavior, decide the moral value of human acts, and remain in organic relationship with man's vocation to eternal life, with the establishment of God's Kingdom in people and among people. In the words of divine Revelation is inscribed the clear code of morality, of which the tablets of the Decalogue of Mount Sinai remain the key- point, and the culmination of which is found in the Gospel: in the Sermon on the Mount(31) and in the commandment of love.(32)

At the same time this code of morality is written in yet another form. It is inscribed in the moral conscience of humanity, in such a way that those who do not know the commandments, in other words the law revealed by God, "are a law to themselves".(33) Thus writes Saint Paul in his Letter to the Romans, and he immediately adds: "They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness".(34)

Here we touch upon matters of supreme importance for your youth and for that plan of life that emerges from it.

This plan accepts the prospect of eternal life first of all through the truth of the deeds on which it will be built. This truth of deeds has its foundation in that twofold presentation of the moral law: the one written on the tablets of the Decalogue of Moses and in the Gospel, and the one inscribed in man's moral conscience. And the conscience "presents itself as a witness" to that law, as Saint Paul writes. This conscience-in the words of the Letter to the Romans-is the "conflicting thoughts" which "accuse or perhaps excuse them".(35) Everyone knows how closely these words correspond to our interior reality: each of us from our youth experiences the voice of conscience.

Therefore when Jesus, in his conversation with the young man, lists the commandments: "Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honour your father and mother", (36) the upright conscience responds with an interior reaction to man's corresponding deeds: it accuses or excuses. But the conscience must not be distorted; the fundamental formulation of the principles of morality must not surrender to deformation by any kind of relativism or utilitarianism.

Dear young friends! The response which Jesus gives to his questioner in the Gospel is addressed to each one of you. Christ asks you about the state of your moral awareness, and at the same time he questions you about the state of your conscience. This is a key question for man: it is the fundamental question of your youth, one that concerns the whole plan of life which must be formed precisely in youth. Its value is the one most closely connected with the relationship of each of you with moral good and evil. The value of this plan depends in an essential way on the authenticity and rectitude of your conscience. It also depends on its sensitivity.

So we find ourselves here at a crucial moment, when at every step time and eternity meet at a level which is proper to man. It is the level of the conscience, the level of moral values: the conscience is the most important dimension of time and history. For history is written not only by the events which in a certain sense happen "from outside"; it is written first of all "from within": it is the history of human consciences, of moral victories and defeats. Here too the essential greatness of man finds its foundation: his authentically human dignity. This is that interior treasure whereby man continually goes beyond himself in the direction of eternity. If it is true that "it is established that people would die only once", it is also true that man carries with him the treasure of conscience, the deposit of good and evil, across the frontier of death, in order that, in the sight of him who is holiness itself, he may find the ultimate and definitive truth about his whole life: "after that comes judgment". (37)

This is just what happens in the conscience: in the interior truth of our acts, in a certain sense, there is constantly present the dimension of eternal life. And simultaneously the same conscience, through moral values, imprints the most expressive seal upon the life of the generations, upon the history and culture of human environments, societies, nations and of all humanity.

In this field how much depends on each one of you !

"Jesus, looking upon him, loved him"

7. Continuing our examination of Christ's conversation with the young man, we now enter another phase. It is a new and decisive one. The young man has received the essential and fundamental response to the question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?", and this response coincides with the whole journey of his life up to this point: "All these I have observed from my youth". How ardently I hope that the journey of the life of each one of you up to this point has similarly coincided with Christ's response! Indeed, it is my hope that your youth will provide you with a sturdy basis of sound principles, that your conscience will attain in these years of your youth that mature clear sightedness that during your whole lives will enable each one of you to

remain always a "person of conscience", a "person of principles", a "person who inspires trust", in other words, a person who is credible. The moral personality formed in this way constitutes the most important contribution that you can make to life in the community, to the family, to society, to professional activity and also to cultural and political activity, and finally to the community of the Church-to all those spheres with which you are already or will one day be connected.

It is a question here of a full and profound human authenticity and of an equal authenticity of the development of the human personality, female or male, with all the characteristics which make up the unrepeatable features of this personality, and which at the same time and in different ways have an impact on the life of the community and of the various environments, beginning with the family. Each one of you must in some way contribute to the richness of these communities, first of all by means of what he or she is. Is it not in this direction that the youth which is the "personal" treasure of each of you tends? Man sees himself, his own humanity, both as his own interior world and as the specific area of his being "with others", "for others".

Precisely here the commandments of the Decalogue and of the Gospel take on a decisive meaning, especially the commandment of love which opens the human person to God and neighbor. For charity is the "bond of perfection".(38) Through charity, man and human fraternity come to fuller maturity. For this reason, love is the greatest(39) and the first of all the commandments, as Christ teaches; (40) and in it all the others are included and made one.

My wish for each of you therefore is that the paths of your youth may meet in Christ, that you may be able to confirm before him, by the witness of your consciences, this evangelical moral code, to the values of which so many individuals of noble spirit have in the course of the generations in some way drawn near.

This is not the appropriate place for quoting the confirmations of this fact which run through the whole history of humanity. What is certain is that from the most ancient times the dictate of conscience has guided every human subject towards an objective moral norm which finds concrete expression in respect for the other person and in the principle of not doing to that person what one would not wish done to oneself.(41)

Here we see already clearly emerging that objective morality of which Saint Paul declares that it is "written on their hearts" and that "their conscience also bears witness" to it.(42) The Christian readily perceives in it a ray from the creating Word that enlightens every man;(43) and precisely because he is a follower of that Word made flesh he rises to the higher law of the Gospel which positively imposes upon him-in the commandment of love-the duty to do to neighbor all the good that he would wish to be done to himself. He thus seals the inner voice of conscience with absolute acceptance of Christ and his word.

It is also my hope that, after you have made the discernment of the essential and important questions for you youth, for the plan of the whole life that lies before you, you will experience what the Gospel means when it says: "Jesus, looking upon him, loved him". May you experience a look like that! May you experience the truth that he, Christ, looks upon you with love!

He looks with love upon every human being. The Gospel confirms this at every step. One can also say that this "loving look" of Christ contains, as it were, a summary and synthesis of the entire Good News. If we would seek the beginning of this look, we must turn back to the Book of Genesis, to that instant when, after the creation of man "male and female", God saw that "it was very good".(44) That very first look of the Creator is reflected in the look of Christ which accompanies his conversation with the young man in the Gospel.

We know that Christ will confirm and seal this look with the redemptive Sacrifice of the Cross, because precisely by means of this Sacrifice that "look" reached a particular depth of love. In it is contained an affirmation of man and of humanity such as only he is capable of—Christ the Redeemer and Bridegroom. Only he "knows what is in every man":(45) he knows man's weakness, but he also and above all knows his dignity.

My wish for each of you is that you may discover this look of Christ, and experience it in all its depth. I do not know at what moment in your life. I think that it will happen when you need it most: perhaps in suffering, perhaps together with the witness of a pure conscience, as in the case of that young man in the Gospel, or perhaps precisely in an opposite situation: together with the sense of guilt, with remorse of conscience. For Christ looked at Peter too in the hour of his fall: when he had three times denied his Master.(46)

Man needs this loving look. He needs to know that he is loved, loved eternally and chosen from eternity.(47) At the same time, this eternal love of divine election accompanies man during life as Christ's look of love. And perhaps most powerfully at the moment of trial, humiliation, persecution, defeat, when our humanity is as it were blotted out in the eyes of other people, insulted and trampled upon. At that moment the awareness that the Father has always loved us in his Son, that Christ always loves each of us, becomes a solid support for our whole human existence. When everything would make us doubt ourselves and the meaning of our life, then this look of Christ, the awareness of the love that in him has shown itself more powerful than any evil and destruction, this awareness enables us to survive.

My wish for you then is that you may experience what the young man in the Gospel experienced: "Jesus, looking upon him, loved him".

"Follow me"

8. From an examination of the Gospel text we see that this look was, so to speak, Christ's response to the testimony which the young man had given of his life up to that moment, of having acted according to God's commandments: "All these I have observed from my youth".

At the same time, this "look of love" was the introduction to the concluding phase of the conversation. In Matthew's account, it was the young man himself who opened this phase, since not only did he declare the personal fidelity to the commandments of the Decalogue which had marked all his previous conduct, but at the same time he asked a new question. In fact he asked: "What do I still lack? ".(48)

This question is a very important one. It shows that in the moral conscience of a person and more precisely of a young person who is forming the plan for his or her whole life, there is hidden an aspiration to "something more". This aspiration makes itself felt in various ways, and we can also observe it among those who seem to be far from our religion.

Among the followers of non-Christian religions, especially Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, we find that for thousands of years there have been hosts of "spiritual men", individuals who often from early youth leave everything in order to live in poverty and purity in the quest for the Absolute that exists beyond the appearances of material things. They strive to attain a state of perfect liberation, they take refuge in God with love and confidence, and with all their souls try to submit to his hidden decrees. They seem impelled by a mysterious inner voice which makes itself heard in their spirit, as it were echoing Saint Paul's words: "The form of this world is passing away", (49) and which guides them to seek things which are greater and more enduring: "Seek the things that are above". (50) They seek the goal with all their strength, working hard to purify their spirit and sometimes reaching the point of making their lives a gift of love to the godhead. They thus become living examples to the people around them, by their very conduct showing the primacy of eternal values over the elusive and sometimes ambiguous values of the society in which they live.

But it is in the Gospel that the aspiration to perfection, to "something more", finds its explicit point of reference. In the Sermon on the Mount Christ confirms the whole moral law, at the centre of which are the Mosaic tablets of the Ten Commandments. But at the same time he confers upon these commandments a new, evangelical meaning. And, as we have already said, it is all concentrated around love, not only as a commandment but also as a gift: "The love of Christ has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us". (51)

In this new context one also comes to understand the programme of the eight Beatitudes which begins the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel. (52)

In this same context the series of commandments which constitute the fundamental code of Christian morality is completed by the series of evangelical counsels, which in a special way express and make concrete Christ's call to perfection, which is a call to holiness.

When the young man asks about the "more": "What do I still lack?", Jesus looks upon him with love, and this love finds here a new meaning. Man is carried interiorly, by the hand of the Holy Spirit, from a life according to the commandments to a life in the awareness of the gift, and Christ's loving look expresses this interior "transition". And Jesus says: "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." (53)

Yes, my dear young friends! The Christian is capable of living in the dimension of gift. Indeed, this dimension is not only "higher" than the dimension of mere moral obligations known from the commandments but it is also "deeper" and more fundamental. It bears witness to a fuller expression of that plan of life which we begin to construct in our youth. The dimension of gift also creates the mature outline of every human and Christian vocation, as will be said later on.

At this moment, however, I wish to speak to you about the particular meaning of the words which Christ said to the young man. And I do this in the conviction that Christ addresses them in the Church to some of his young questioners in every generation. In ours too. His words therefore signify a particular vocation in the community of the People of God. The Church finds Christ's "Follow me"(54) at the beginning of every call to service in the ministerial priesthood, which simultaneously in the Catholic Church of the Latin Rite is linked to the conscious and free choice of celibacy. The Church finds the same "follow me" of Christ at the beginning of the religious vocation, whereby, through the profession of the evangelical counsels (chastity, poverty and obedience), a man or woman recognizes as his or her own the programme of life which Christ himself lived on earth, for the sake of the Kingdom of God.(55) By professing religious vows, such individuals commit themselves to bearing a particular witness to the love of God above all things, and likewise to that call to union with God in eternity which is directed to everyone. But there is a need for some to bear an exceptional witness to this before other people.

I limit myself merely to mentioning this matter in the present Letter, since it has already been more fully presented elsewhere and on a number of occasions.(56) I mention it here because in the context of Christ's conversation with the young man it acquires a particular clarity, especially the question of evangelical poverty. I also mention it because Christ's call "Follow me", precisely in this exceptional and charismatic sense, usually makes itself heard in youth; sometimes it is even heard in childhood.

It is for this reason that I wish to say this to all of you young people, in this important phase of the development of your personality as a man or a woman: if such a call comes into your heart, do not silence it! Let it develop into the maturity of a vocation! Respond to it through prayer and fidelity to the commandments! For "the harvest is plentiful" (57) and there is an enormous need for many to be reached by Christ's call "Follow me". There is an enormous need for priests according to the heart of God-and the Church and the world of today have an enormous need of the witness of a life given without reserve to God: the witness of that nuptial love of Christ himself which in a particular way will make the Kingdom of God present among people and bring it nearer to the world.

Permit me then to complete still further the words of Christ the Lord about the harvest being plentiful. Yes, this harvest of the Gospel is plentiful, this harvest of salvation! "But the labourers are few!". Perhaps this is felt more keenly today than in the past, especially in certain countries, as also in certain Institutes of consecrated life and similar Institutes.

"Pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest", (58) continues Christ. And these words, especially in our times, become a programme of prayer and action for more priestly and religious vocations. With this programme the Church addresses herself to you, to youth. And you too: pray! And if the fruit of this prayer of the Church comes to life in the depths of your heart, listen to the Master as he says: "Follow me".

The plan of life and the christian vocation

9. These words in the Gospel certainly concern the priestly or religious vocation; but at the same time they help us to understand more deeply the question of vocation in a still wider and more fundamental sense.

One could speak here of the "life" vocation, which in a way is identical with that plan of life which each of you draws up in the period of your youth. But "vocation" means something more than "plan". In this second case I myself am the subject who draws it up, and this corresponds better to the reality of the person which each of you is. This "plan" is a "vocation" inasmuch as in it there make themselves felt the various factors which call. These factors usually make up a particular order of values (also called a "hierarchy of values"), from which emerges an ideal to be realized, an ideal which is attractive to a young heart. In this process the "vocation" becomes a "plan", and the plan begins to be also a vocation.

But given the fact that we are in the presence of Christ and are basing our reflections about youth on Christ's conversation with the young man, that relationship of the "plan of life" to the "life vocation" needs to be stated even more precisely. A human being is a creature and at the same time an adopted child of God in Christ: he is a child of God. Hence during youth a person puts the question, "What must I do?" not only to himself and to other people from whom he can expect an answer, especially his parents and teachers, but he puts it also to God, as his Creator and Father. He puts it in the context of this particular interior sphere in which he has learned to be in a close relationship with God, above all in prayer. He therefore asks God: "What must I do?", what is your plan for my life? Your creative, fatherly plan? What is your will? I wish to do it.

In this context the "plan" takes on the meaning of a "life vocation", as something which is entrusted by God to an individual as a task. Young people, entering into themselves and at the same time entering into conversation with Christ in prayer, desire as it were to read the eternal thought which God the Creator and Father has in their regard. They then become convinced that the task assigned to them by God is left completely to their own freedom, and at the same time is determined by various circumstances of an interior and exterior nature. Examining these circumstances, the young person, boy or girl, constructs his or her plan of life and at the same time recognizes this plan as the vocation to which God is calling him or her.

I desire therefore to entrust to all of you, the young people to whom this Letter is addressed, this marvelous task which is linked with the discovery before God of each one's life vocation. This is an exciting task. It is a fascinating interior undertaking. In this undertaking your humanity develops and grows, while your young personality acquires ever greater inner maturity. You become rooted in that which each of you is, in order to become that which you must become: for yourself- for other people- for God.

Parallel with the process of discovering one's own "life vocation" there should also be a progressively clearer realization of how this life vocation is at the same time a "Christian vocation".

Here it should be noted that in the period before the Second Vatican Council the concept of "vocation" was applied first of all to the priesthood and religious life, as if Christ had addressed to the young person his evangelical "Follow me" only for these cases. The Council has broadened this way of looking at things. Priestly and religious vocations have kept their particular character and their sacramental and charismatic importance in the life of the People of God. But at the same time the awareness renewed by the Second Vatican Council of the universal sharing of all the baptized in Christ's three-fold prophetic, priestly and kingly mission, (tria munera), as also the awareness of the universal vocation to holiness,(59) have led to a realization of the fact that every human life vocation, as a Christian vocation, corresponds to the evangelical call. Christ's "Follow me" makes itself heard on the different paths taken by the disciples and confessors of the divine Redeemer. There are different ways of becoming imitators of Christ-not only by bearing witness to the eschatological Kingdom of truth and love, but also by striving to bring about the transformation of the whole of temporal reality according to the spirit of the Gospel.(60) It is at this point that there also begins the apostolate of the laity, which is inseparable from the very essence of the Christian vocation.

These are the extremely important premises for the plan of life which corresponds to the essential dynamism of your youth. You must examine this plan-independently of the concrete content "of life" with which it will be filled-in the light of the words addressed by Christ to the young man in the Gospel.

You must also rethink-and very profoundly-the meaning of Baptism and Confirmation. For in these two sacraments is contained the fundamental deposit of the Christian life and vocation. From these there begins the path towards the Eucharist, which contains the fullness of the sacramental gifts granted to the Christian: all the Church's spiritual wealth is concentrated in this Sacrament of love. It is also necessary-and always in relationship with the Eucharist-to reflect on the Sacrament of Penance, which is of irreplaceable importance for the formation of the Christian personality, especially if it is linked with spiritual direction, which is a systematic school of the interior life.

I speak briefly of all this, even though each of the Church's Sacraments has its own definite and specific reference to youth and to young people. I trust that this theme will receive detailed treatment from others, particularly pastoral ministers specially appointed to work with young people.

The Church herself-as the Second Vatican Council teaches-is "a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind".(61) Every vocation in life, insofar as it is a "Christian" vocation, is rooted in the sacramentality of the Church: it is therefore formed through the Sacraments of our faith. The Sacraments enable us from our youth to open our human "I" to the saving action of God, that is, of the Most Blessed Trinity. They enable us to share in God's life, living the authentic human life to the full. In this way our human life acquires a new dimension and at the same time its Christian originality: awareness of the demands placed on man by the Gospel is matched by awareness of the gift which surpasses everything. "If you knew the gift of God",(62) said Christ, speaking to the Samaritan woman.

"Great sacrament of marriage"

10. Against this vast background that your youthful plan of life acquires in relation to the idea of the Christian vocation, I wish to examine, together with you young people to whom I am addressing this Letter, the question that in a certain sense is at the heart of the youth of all of you. This is one of the central questions of human life, and at the same time one of the central themes of reflection, creativity and culture. It is also one of the main biblical themes, and one to which I personally have devoted much reflection and analysis. God created human beings: male and female, thereby introducing into the history of the human race that special "duality" together with complete equality, in the matter of human dignity; and with marvelous complementarity, in the matter of the division of the attributes, properties and tasks linked with the masculinity and femininity of the human being.

Thus, this is a theme that is necessarily inscribed in the personal "I" of each one of you. Youth is the period when this great theme affects in an experimental and creative way the soul and body of every young woman and young man, and manifests itself in the youthful conscience together with the fundamental discovery of the personal "I" in all its manifold potentiality. Then also on the horizon of a young heart a new experience occurs: the experience of love, which from the beginning has to be included in that plan of life which youth spontaneously creates and forms.

In each separate case all of this has its own unrepeatable subjective expression, its affective richness, indeed its metaphysical beauty. At the same time, in all of this there is contained a powerful exhortation not to distort this expression, not to destroy this treasure and not to disfigure this beauty. Be convinced that this call comes from God himself, who created man "in his own image and likeness" precisely "as man and woman". This call flows from the Gospel and makes itself heard in the voice of young consciences, if they have preserved their simplicity and purity: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God".(63) Yes, through that love which is born in you-and wishes to become a part of your whole plan of life-you must see God who is love.(64)

And so I ask you not to break off your conversation with Christ in this extremely important phase of your youth; I ask you rather to commit yourselves even more. When Christ says "Follow me", his call can mean: "I call you to still another love"; but very often it means: "Follow me", follow me who am the Bridegroom of the Church who is my bride; come, you too become the bridegroom of your bride, you too become the bride of your spouse. Both of you become sharers in that mystery, that Sacrament, which the Letter to the Ephesians says is something great: great "in reference to Christ and the Church".(65)

Much depends on the fact that you, on this path too, should follow Christ; that you should not flee from him, when you are occupied with this matter which you rightly consider the great event of your heart, a matter that exists only in you and between you. I want you to believe and to be convinced that this great matter has its definitive dimension in God, who is love-in God, who in the absolute unity of his divinity is also a communion of persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I want you to believe and to be convinced that your human "great mystery" has its beginning in God who is the Creator, is rooted in Christ the Redeemer, who as the spouse "gave himself", and

who teaches all husbands and wives how to "give themselves" in the full measure of each one's personal dignity. Christ teaches us married love.

To set out on the path of the married vocation means to learn married love day by day, year by year: love according to soul and body, love that "is patient, is kind, that does not insist on its own way... and does not rejoice at wrong": love that "rejoices in the right", love that "endures all things".(66)

It is precisely this love that you young people need if your married future is to "pass the test" of the whole of life. And precisely this test is part of the very essence of the vocation which, through marriage, you intend to include in the plan of your life.

And so I do not cease to pray to Christ and to the Mother of Fair Love for the love that is born in young hearts. Many times in my life it has been my task to accompany in a sense more closely this love of young people. Thanks to this experience I have come to understand just how essential the matter that we are dealing with here is, how important and how great it is. I think that to a large extent the future of humanity is decided along the paths of this love, initially youthful love, which you and she, you and he discover along the paths of your youth. This can be called a great adventure, but it is also a great task.

Today, the principles of Christian morality concerning marriage are in many circles being presented in a distorted way. Attempts are being made to impose on environments and even entire societies a model that calls itself "progressive" and "modern". It then goes unnoticed that this model transforms a human being and perhaps especially a woman from a subject into an object (an object of specific manipulation), and the whole great content of love is reduced to "pleasure", which, even though it involved both parties, would still be selfish in its essence. Finally the child, who is the fruit and the fresh incarnation of the love between the two, becomes ever more "an annoying addition". The materialistic and consumeristic civilization is penetrating this whole wonderful complex of conjugal and paternal and maternal love, and stripping it of that profoundly human content which from the beginning was also permeated by a divine mark and reflection.

Dear young friends! Do not allow this treasure to be taken away from you! Do not inscribe in the plan of your life a deformed, impoverished and falsified content: love "rejoices in the truth". Seek out this truth where it is really to be found! If necessary, be resolved to go against the current of popular opinion and propaganda slogans! Do not be afraid of the love that places clear demands on people. These demands-as you find them in the constant teaching of the Church-are precisely capable of making your love a true love.

If anywhere, it is especially here that I wish to repeat the hope which I expressed at the beginning, namely, that you will be "always prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you!". The Church and humanity entrust to you the great reality of that love which is the basis of marriage, the family and the future. The Church and humanity firmly believe that you will bring about its rebirth; they firmly believe that you will make it

beautiful: beautiful in a human and Christian way. In a human and Christian way great, mature and responsible.

Inheritance

11. In the vast sphere in which the plan of life, drawn up in youth, comes into contact with "other people", we have touched upon the most sensitive point. Let us go on to consider that this central point, at which our personal "I" opens up to life "with others" and "for others" in the marriage covenant, finds in Sacred Scripture a very important passage: "Man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife".(67)

This word "leaves" deserves special attention. From its very beginning the history of humanity passes-and will do so until the end- through the family. A man enters the family through the birth which he owes to his parents, his father and mother, and at the right moment he leaves this first environment of life and love in order to pass to a new one. By "leaving father and mother", each one of you at the same time, in a certain sense, bears them within you; you assume the manifold inheritance that has its direct beginning and source in them and in their family. In this way too, when you leave, each one of you remains: the inheritance that you receive links you permanently with those who passed it on to you and to whom you owe so much. And the individual-he and she-will continue to pass on the same inheritance. Thus also the fourth commandment of the Decalogue is of such great importance: "Honour your father and your mother".(68)

It is a question here first of all of the heritage of being a human person, and then of being one in a more precisely defined personal and social situation. Here even the physical similarity to one's parents plays its part. Still more important is the whole heritage of culture, at the almost daily centre of which is language. Your parents have taught each one of you to speak the language which constitutes the essential expression of the social bond with other people. This bond is established by limits which are wider than the family itself or a given environment. These are the limits of at least a tribe and most often those of a people or a nation into which you were born.

In this way the family inheritance grows wider. Through your upbringing in your family you share in a specific culture; you also share in the history of your people or nation. The family bond means at the same time membership of a community wider than the family and a still further basis of personal identity. If the family is the first teacher of each one of you, at the same time-through the family-you are also taught by the tribe, people or nation with which you are linked through the unity of culture, language and history.

This inheritance likewise constitutes a call in the ethical sense. By receiving and inheriting faith and the values and elements that make up the culture of your society and the history of your nation, each one of you is spiritually endowed in your individual humanity. Here we come back to the parable of the talents, the talents which we receive from the Creator through our parents and families, and also through the national community to which we belong. In regard to this inheritance we cannot maintain a passive attitude, still less a defeatist one, as did the last of the servants described in the parable of the talents.(69) We must do everything we can to accept this spiritual inheritance, to confirm it, maintain it and increase it. This is an important task for all

societies, especially perhaps for those that find themselves at the beginning of their independent existence, or for those that must defend from the danger of destruction from outside or of decay from within the very existence and essential identity of the particular nation.

Writing to you young people, I try to have before my mind's eye the complex and separate situations of the tribes, peoples and nations of our world. Your youth, and the plan of life which during your young years each one of you works out, are from the very beginning part of the history of these different societies, and this happens not "from without" but pre-eminently "from within". It becomes for you a question of family awareness and consequently of national awareness: a question of the heart, a question of conscience. The concept of "homeland" develops immediately after the concept of "family", and in a certain sense one within the other. And as you gradually experience this social bond which is wider than that of the family, you also begin to share in responsibility for the common good of that larger family which is the earthly "homeland" of each one of you. The prominent figures of a nation's history, ancient or modern, also guide your youth and foster the development of that social love which is more often called "love of country".

Talents and tasks

12. This context of family and society which is your homeland gradually comes to include a theme closely connected with the parable of the talents. For little by little you recognize the "talent" or "talents" which each of you has, and you begin to use them in a creative way, you begin to increase them. And this happens through work.

What an enormous range of possible directions, capacities and interests exists in this field! I shall not attempt to list them here even by way of example, since there is a danger of leaving out more than I could take into consideration. I shall therefore pre-suppose all that variety and multiplicity of directions. It also shows the manifold wealth of discoveries which youth brings with it. Referring to the Gospel, we can say that youth is the time for discerning talents. It is also the time when one starts out on the many paths along which all human activity, work and creativity have developed and continue to do so.

I hope that all of you will discover yourselves along these paths. I hope that you will set out upon them with interest, diligence and enthusiasm. Work-all work-is linked to effort: "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread",⁽⁷⁰⁾ and this experience of hard work is shared by each one of you from your earliest years. At the same time, however, work in a specific way forms man, and in a certain sense creates him. So it is always a question of effort which is creative.

This refers not only to study or mental and intellectual work in general but also to the ordinary kinds of physical work that seemingly have nothing "creative" about them.

The work which characterizes the period of youth is, above all, a preparation for the work of adulthood, and so is linked to the school. As I write these words to you young people, I am therefore thinking of all the schools all over the world to which your young lives are linked for a number of years, at higher and higher levels, according to your degree of intellectual

development and your inclinations: from elementary schools to universities. I am also thinking of all the adults, my brothers and sisters, who are your teachers and instructors, the guides of your young minds and characters. How great is their task! What a special responsibility is theirs! But how great too is their merit!

Finally, I am thinking of those groups of young people, your peers, who-especially in certain societies and environments-are deprived of the opportunity of education, often even at the elementary level. This fact is a permanent challenge to all those responsible for education on a national and international scale, that this state of affairs be appropriately improved. For education is one of the fundamental benefits of human civilization. It is especially important for the young. Upon it also depends to a great extent the future of the whole of society.

However, when we discuss the question of education, study, learning and school, there emerges a question of fundamental importance for the human person, and in a special way for a young person. This is the question of truth. Truth is the light of the human intellect. If the intellect seeks, from youth onwards, to know reality in its different dimensions, it does so in order to possess the truth: in order to live the truth. Such is the structure of the human spirit. Hunger for truth is its fundamental aspiration and expression.

Now Christ says: "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free".(71) Of the words contained in the Gospel these are certainly among the most important. For they refer to man in his totality. They explain what the dignity and greatness proper to man are built upon from within, in the dimensions of the human spirit. The knowledge which frees man does not depend on education alone, even of university standard-an illiterate person can have it too; though education, the systematic knowledge of reality, should serve the dignity of the human person. It should therefore serve the truth.

The service of truth is also carried out in the work that you will be called upon to perform when you have completed the programme of your education. At school you have to acquire the programme of your education. At school you have to acquire the intellectual, technical and practical skills that will enable you to take your place usefully in the great world of human work. But while it is true that the school has to prepare you for work, including manual work, it is equally true that work itself is a school in which great and important values are learned: it has an eloquence of its own which makes a valid contribution to human culture.

However, in the relationship between education and work, a relationship characteristic of society today, there emerge very serious problems of a practical nature. I am referring in particular to the problem of unemployment, and more generally of the lack of jobs that in various ways is causing difficulties to young people all over the world. As you are well aware, this problem involves still other questions which from your school-days cast a shadow of uncertainty over your future. You ask yourselves: Does society need me? Will I too be able to find a type of work that will enable me to become independent? To bring up a family of my own in dignified living conditions, and, most important of all, in a home of my own? In short, is it really true that society is expecting my contribution?

The seriousness of these questions impels me once more to remind governments and all those responsible for the economy and development of nations that work is a human right; and it is therefore to be guaranteed by ensuring that it receives the most assiduous care and by centering economic policy on making sure that sufficient jobs are created for everyone, and especially for the young, who so often are the victims of unemployment today. We are all convinced that "work is a good thing for man-a good thing for his humanity- because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed, in a sense becomes 'more a human being". (72)

Self-education and related threats

13. What concerns the school as an institution and environment above all includes youth. But, I would say that the eloquence of Christ's words about truth quoted above still more concern young people themselves. For while there is no doubt that the family educates and that the school teaches and educates, at the same time both the action of the family and that of the school will remain incomplete (and could even be made useless) unless each one of you young people undertakes the work of your own education. Education in the family and at school can only provide you with a certain number of elements for the work of self-education.

And in this sphere Christ's words: "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free", become an essential programme. Young people, one might say, have an inborn "sense of truth". And truth must be used for freedom: young people also have a spontaneous "desire for freedom". And what does it mean to be free? It means to know how to use one's freedom in truth-to be "truly" free. To be truly free does not at all mean doing everything that pleases me, or doing what I want to do. Freedom contains in itself the criterion of truth, the discipline of truth. To be truly free means to use one's own freedom for what is a true good. Continuing therefore: to be truly free means to be a person of upright conscience, to be responsible, to be a person "for others".

All this constitutes the very kernel of what we call education, and especially what we call self-education. Yes: self-education! For an interior structure of this kind, where "the truth makes us free",-cannot be built only "from outside". Each individual must build this structure "from within"-build it with effort, perseverance and patience (which is not always so easy for young people). And it is precisely this structure which is called self-education. The Lord Jesus also speaks of this when he emphasizes that only "with perseverance" can we "save our souls". (73) "To save our souls": this is the fruit of self- education.

Contained in all this is a new way of looking at youth. Here we are no longer speaking of a simple plan of life that has to be accomplished in the future. It must be accomplished already in the period of youth, if through work, education, and especially through self-education, we create life itself, building the foundation of the successive development of our personality. In this sense, we can say that youth is "the sculptress that shapes the whole of life", and the form that youth gives to the concrete humanity of each of you is consolidated in the whole of life.

If this has an important positive significance, unfortunately it can also have an important negative one. You cannot close your eyes to the threats that lie in wait for you during the period of youth. These too can leave their mark on your whole life.

I am alluding for example to their temptation to bitter criticism, which would like to challenge and review everything; or the temptation to skepticism regarding traditional values, which can easily degenerate into a sort of extreme cynicism when it is a matter of dealing with problems connected with one's work, career or even marriage. Again, how can one pass over in silence the temptations caused by the growth, especially in the more prosperous countries, of a type of entertainment business that distracts people from a serious commitment in life and encourages passivity, selfishness and self-isolation? Dear young people, you are under threat from the bad use of advertising techniques, which plays upon the natural tendency to avoid effort and promises the immediate satisfaction of every desire, while the consumerism that goes with it suggests that man should seek self-fulfillment especially in the enjoyment of material goods. How many young people, succumbing to the fascination of deceptive mirages, give themselves up to the uncontrolled power of the instincts, or venture on to paths which seem full of promise but which in reality are lacking in genuinely human prospects! I feel the need to repeat what I wrote in the Message which I dedicated precisely to you for the World Day of Peace: "Some of you may be tempted to take flight from responsibility: in the fantasy worlds of alcohol and drugs, in short lived sexual relationships without commitment to marriage and family, in indifference, in cynicism and even in violence. Put yourselves on guard against the fraud of a world that wants to exploit or misdirect your energetic and powerful search for happiness and meaning".(74)

I write all this to you in order to express my great concern for you. For if you must "always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you", then everything that works against this hope must cause concern. And as for all those who try to destroy your youth by holding out various temptations and illusions, I must remind them of the words of Christ with which he speaks about scandal and those who cause it: "Woe to him by whom temptations to sin come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea, than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin".(75)

Grave words! Especially grave in the mouth of him who came to reveal love. But whoever carefully reads these words of the Gospel must feel how deep is the antithesis between good and evil, between virtue and sin. He must even more clearly perceive what importance the youth of each one of you has in the eyes of Christ. It was precisely his love for young people that caused him to utter these grave and severe words. They contain as it were a distant echo of Christ's conversation with the young man in the Gospel, which this Letter constantly refers to.

Youth as "growth"

14. Allow me to conclude this part of my reflections by recalling the words with which the Gospel speaks about the youthful years of Jesus of Nazareth. These words are brief, even though they cover the period of thirty years which he spent in the family home, with Mary and with Joseph the carpenter. The Evangelist Luke writes: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favour with God and man".(76)

Youth, then, is "growth". In the light of all that has been said so far on this theme, this Gospel passage strikes one as particularly synthetical and evocative. Growth "in stature" refers to an individual's natural relationship with time: this growth is as it were an "upward" stage in the course of a person's life. It is the time of psychophysical development: the growth of all the energies through which normal human individuality is built up. But this process has to be accompanied by "growth" in wisdom and grace.

For all of you, dear young friends, I wish just such "growth". One can say that youth is youth precisely through that growth. In this way youth acquires its own unrepeatable character. In this way it is given to each one of you in your personal and at the same time community experience as a special value. In a similar way, it also becomes consolidated in the experience of adults whose youth is already behind them and who are moving from the "upward" stage towards the "downward" stage, making up the overall pattern of life.

Youth should be a process of "growth" bringing with it the gradual accumulation of all that is true, good and beautiful, even when this growth is linked "from outside" to suffering, the loss of loved ones, and the whole experience of evil that constantly makes itself felt in the world in which we live.

Youth should be "growth". For this purpose, contact with the visible world, with nature, is of immense importance. In one's youth this relationship to the visible world is enriching in a way that differs from knowledge of the world "obtained from books". It enriches us in a direct way. One could say that by being in contact with nature we absorb into our own human existence the very mystery of creation which reveals itself to us through the untold wealth and variety of visible beings, and which at the same time is always beckoning us towards what is hidden and invisible. Wisdom-both from the inspired books (77) as also from the testimony of many brilliant minds-seems in different ways to reveal "the transparency of the world". It is good for people to read this wonderful book-the "book of nature", which lies open for each one of us. What the youthful mind and heart read in this book seems to be in perfect harmony with the exhortation to wisdom: "Acquire wisdom, acquire insight... Do not forsake her and she will keep you; love her and she will guard you".(78)

Man today, especially in the context of highly developed technical and industrial civilization, has become the explorer of nature on a grand scale, often treating it in a utilitarian way, thus destroying many of its treasures and attractions and polluting the natural environment of earthly existence. But nature is also given to us to be admired and contemplated, like a great mirror of the world. It reflects the Creator's covenant with his creature, the centre of which has been, from the beginning, in man, directly created "in the image" of the Creator.

And so my hope for you young people is that your "growth in stature and in wisdom" will come about through contact with nature. Make time for this! Do not miss it! Accept too the fatigue and effort that this contact sometimes involves, especially when we wish to attain particularly challenging goals. Such fatigue is creative, and also constitutes the element of healthy relaxation which is as necessary as study and work.

This fatigue and effort have their own place in the Bible, especially in Saint Paul, who compares the whole Christian life to a race in the sports stadium.(79)

Each one of you needs this fatigue and effort, which not only tempers the body but also enables the whole person to experience the joy of self mastery and victory over obstacles and barriers. This is certainly one of the elements of "growth" that characterize youth.

I likewise hope that this "growth" will come about through contact with the achievements of humanity, and still more through contact with living people. How great is their richness and variety! Youth seems particularly sensitive to the truth, goodness and beauty contained in the works of humanity. Through contact with people on the level of so many different cultures, of so many arts and sciences, we learn the truth about man (so evocatively expressed also in Psalm 8), the truth which can build up and enrich the humanity of each one of us.

In a special way, however, we study the human person through contact with others. Being young should enable you to "increase in wisdom" through this contact. For youth is the time for new contacts, new companionships and friendships, in a circle wider than the family alone. There unfolds before us the vast field of experience, which is important not only in regard to knowledge but also in relation to education and ethics. This whole youthful experience will be useful to the extent that it gives you the ability to make critical judgments and above all the capacity of discernment in all things human. Your youthful experience will be blessed, you will gradually learn from it that essential truth concerning man-concerning every human being and concerning oneself-the truth that is summed up thus in the famous passage of the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*: "Man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself".(80)

In this way therefore we learn to know other human beings, in order to become more fully human through our capacity for "self- giving": for becoming men and women "for others" . This truth about man-this anthropology-has its incomparable culmination in Jesus of Nazareth. Hence the great importance of his young years, when she increased in wisdom.. and in favour before God and man".

My wish for you too is a similar "growth" through contact with God. For this purpose, contact with nature and with other people can help indirectly, but the special and direct means is prayer. Pray and learn to pray! Open your hearts and your consciences to the one who knows you better than you know yourselves. Talk to him! Deepen your knowledge of the word of the Living God by reading and meditating on the Scriptures.

These are the methods and means for coming close to God and making contact with him. Remember that it is a question of a two- way relationship. God responds also with the most "free gift of self", a gift which in biblical language is called "grace". Strive to live in the grace of God!

So much for the theme of "growth", which I write about in order to indicate only its main aspects, each of which could be discussed at much greater length. I hope that this is happening in youth circles and groups, in movements and organizations, which are becoming so numerous in

the various countries and continents, each one being guided by its own method of spiritual work and apostolate. The intention of these bodies, with the assistance of the Pastors of the Church, is to show young people the path of that "growth" which in a certain sense constitutes the evangelical definition of youth.

The great challenge of the future

15. The Church looks to the young; or rather, the Church in a special way sees herself in the young - in you as a group and in each of you as individuals. This is how it has been since the beginning, since apostolic times. The words of Saint John in his First Letter offer a particular testimony of this: "I am writing to you, young people, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, children, because you know the Father... I write to you, young people, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you".(81)

The words of the Apostle can be linked with Christ's conversation with the young man in the Gospel, and they re-echo loud and clear from generation to generation.

In our own generation, at the close of the second millennium after Christ, the Church continues to see herself in the young. And how does the Church see herself? Let the teaching of the Second Vatican Council be a particular testimony of this. The Church sees herself as a sacrament, or sign and means of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind".(82) And so she sees herself in relationship to the whole great human family which is in constant growth. She sees herself in worldwide dimensions. She sees herself on the paths of ecumenism, on the paths towards the unity of all Christians, for which Christ himself prayed and which is of unquestionable urgency in our time. She also sees herself in dialogue with the followers of the non-Christian religions, and with all people of good will. This dialogue is a dialogue of salvation, which should also serve the cause of peace in the world and justice among people.

You young people are the hope of the Church that sees herself and her mission in the world precisely in this way. She speaks to you about this mission. An expression of this was the Message of 1 January 1985, for the celebration of the World Day of Peace. That Message was addressed to you, on the basis of the belief that "the path of peace is at the same time the path of the young" (Peace and youth go forward together). This belief is an appeal and at the same time a commitment: once again it is a question of being always "prepared to make a defence to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you" the hope that is linked with you. As you can see, this hope concerns fundamental and at the same time universal matters.

All of you live every day among those dear to you. But this circle gradually expands. An ever increasing number of people come to share in your life, and you yourselves discern the outlines of a communion that unites you with them. This is almost always a community that in some way is made up of different elements. It is differentiated in the way that the Second Vatican Council perceived and declared in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church and in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. In some cases your young years are being lived in environments that are uniform from the point of view of religious confession, in others

where there are differences of religion, or even on the border-line between faith and unbelief, the latter being in the form either of agnosticism or of atheism in its various expressions.

It seems nevertheless that when faced by certain questions these many different communities of young people feel, think and react in a very similar way. For example, it seems that they are all united by a common attitude towards the fact that hundreds of thousands of people are living in extreme poverty and are even dying of hunger, while at the same time vast sums are being spent on the production of nuclear weapons, the stocks of which at this very moment are capable of bringing about humanity's self-destruction. There are other similar tensions and threats, on a scale never before known in the history of humanity. This is dealt with in the already mentioned Message for the New Year, so I will not go into the problems again here. We are all aware that the horizon of the lives of the billions of people who make up the human family at the close of the second millennium after Christ seems to portend the possibility of calamities and catastrophes on a truly apocalyptic scale.

In this situation you young people can rightly ask the preceding generations: How have we come to this point? Why have we reached such a degree of peril for humanity all over the world? What are the causes of the injustice that affronts our eyes? Why are so many dying of hunger? Why so many millions of refugees at the different borders? Why so many cases in which fundamental human rights are trampled on? So many prisons and concentration camps, so much systematic violence and the murder of innocent people, so much abuse of men and women, so much torture and torment inflicted on human bodies and human consciences? And in the midst of all this there is also the fact of young men who have on their consciences so many innocent victims, because it has been instilled into them that only in this way-through organized terrorism-can the world be made a better place. So again you ask: Why?

You young people can ask all these questions, indeed you must! For this is the world you are living in today, and in which you will have to live tomorrow, when the older generation has passed on. So you rightly ask: Why does humanity's great progress in science and technology-which cannot be compared with any preceding period of history-why does man's progress in mastering the material world turn against humanity itself in so many ways? So you rightly ask, though also with a sense of inner foreboding: Is this state of affairs irreversible? Can it be changed? Shall we succeed in changing it?

You rightly ask this. Yes, this is the fundamental question facing your generation.

This is how your conversation with Christ goes on, the conversation begun one day in the Gospel. That young man asked: "What must I do to have eternal life?". And you put the same question in the style of the times in which it is your turn to be young: "What must we do to ensure that life-the flourishing life of the human family-will not be turned into the graveyard of nuclear death? What must we do to avoid being dominated by the sin of universal injustice? The sin of holding people in contempt and scorning their dignity, notwithstanding so many declarations confirming all human rights? What must we do? And also: Will we be able to do it.?"

Christ answers as he answered the young people of the first generation of the Church through the words of the Apostle: "I am writing to you, young people, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, children, because you know the Father... I write to you, young people, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you".(83) The words of the Apostle, going back almost two thousand years, are also an answer for today. They use the simple and strong language of faith that bears within itself victory over the evil in the world: "And this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith".(84) These words have the strength of the experience of the Cross and Resurrection of Christ, the experience of the Apostles and of the generations of Christians that followed them. In this experience the whole of the Gospel is confirmed. These words also confirm the truth contained in Christ's conversation with the young man.

As we approach the end of this Letter, let us therefore pause for a moment to consider these words of the Apostle, which are both a confirmation and a challenge for you. They are also an answer.

In you, in your young hearts, there is a strong desire for genuine brotherhood between all people, without divisions, conflicts or discrimination. Yes! You young people are bearers of the yearning for brotherhood and widespread solidarity-and certainly you do not want conflict between human beings, one against the other, in any form. Does not this yearning for brotherhood (each one is neighbor to the other! all are brothers and sisters of one another!) witness to the fact that, as the Apostle writes, "you have known the Father"? Because there can only be brothers and sisters where there is a father. And only where the Father is are people brothers and sisters.

So if you cherish a desire for brotherhood, this means that "the word of God abides in you". There abides in you that teaching which Christ brought, and which is rightly called the "Good News". And on your lips, or at least in the depths of your hearts, there abides the prayer of the Lord which begins with the words "Our Father". The prayer which reveals the Father and at the same time confirms that people are brothers and sisters of one another -and whose whole essence is contrary to all programmes based on the principle of conflict between human beings in any form. The "Our Father" leads human hearts away from enmity, hatred, violence, terrorism, discrimination-from the situations in which human dignity and human rights are trampled upon.

The Apostle writes that you young people are strong in the strength of divine doctrine: the doctrine contained in Christ's Gospel and summed up in the "Our Father". Yes! You are strong in this divine teaching, you are strong in this prayer. You are strong because it instills into you love, good will, respect for people, for their life, their dignity, their conscience, their beliefs and their rights. If "you know the Father", you are strong with the power of human brotherhood.

You are also strong for the struggle: not for the struggle of one against another in the name of some ideology or practice separated from the very roots of the Gospel, but strong for the struggle against evil, against the real evil: against everything that offends God, against every injustice and exploitation, against every falsehood and deceit, against everything that insults and humiliates, against everything that profanes human society and human relationships, against every crime against life: against every sin.

The Apostle writes: "You have overcome the evil one"! And so it is. It is necessary to keep going back to the origin of evil and of sin in the history of mankind and the universe, just as Christ went back to these same roots in the Paschal Mystery of his Cross and Resurrection. There is no need to be afraid to call the first agent of evil by his name: the Evil One. The strategy which he used and continues to use is that of not revealing himself, so that the evil implanted by him from the beginning may receive its development from man himself, from systems and from relationships between individuals, from classes and nations-so as also to become ever more a "structural" sin, ever less identifiable as "personal" sin. In other words, so that man may feel in a certain sense "freed" from sin but at the same time be ever more deeply immersed in it.

The Apostle says: "Young people, you are strong": all that is needed is that "the word of God abide in you". Then you are strong: thus you will succeed in getting at the hidden workings of evil, its sources, and thus you will gradually succeed in changing the world, transforming it, making it more human, more fraternal-and at the same time more of God. For it is impossible to detach the world from God or set it up in opposition to God in the human heart. Nor is it possible to detach man from God and set him up in opposition to God. For this would be against the nature of man -against the intrinsic truth that constitutes the whole of reality! Truly the human heart is restless until it rests in God.(85) These words of the great Augustine never lose their validity.

Final message

16. So, my young friends, I hand you this Letter which continues the Gospel conversation of Christ with the young man-and flows from the testimony of the Apostles and of the first generations of Christians. I give you this Letter in International Youth Year, as we approach the end of the second Christian millennium. I entrust it to you in the twentieth year since the close of the Second Vatican Council, which called young people "the hope of the Church" ,(86) and which addressed to the young people of that time-as also to those of today and of all time-a "closing Message" in which the Church is described as the real youth of the world, as the one who "possesses what constitutes strength and the charm of youth, that is to say, the ability to rejoice with what is beginning, to give oneself unreservedly, to renew oneself and to set out again for new conquests".(87) This I do on Palm Sunday, the day on which I am meeting many of you, pilgrims in Saint Peter's Square, here in Rome. Precisely on this day the Bishop of Rome prays together with you for all the young people of the world, for each and every one. We are praying in the community of the Church, so that-against the background of the difficult times in which we live-you "may always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you". Yes, precisely you, because on you depends the future, on you depends also the end of this millennium and the beginning of the next. So do not be passive; take up your responsibilities-in all the fields open to you in our world! For this same intention the Bishops and priests in the different places will pray together with you.

And as we thus pray, in the great community of the young people of the universal Church and of all the Churches, we have before our eyes the image of Mary, who accompanies Christ at the beginning of his mission among men. This is the Mary of Cana of Galilee, who intercedes for the young people, for the newly-married couple when at the marriage feast the wine for the guests

runs out. Then Christ's Mother says these words to those serving at the feast: "Do whatever he tells you".(88) He, the Christ.

I repeat these words of the Mother of God and I address them to you, to each one of you young people: "Do whatever Christ tells you". And I bless you in the name of the Most Holy Trinity. Amen.

Given in Rome, at Saint Peter's, on 31 March, Palm Sunday and the Sunday of the Lord's Passion, in the year 1985, the seventh of my Pontificate.

JOHN PAUL II

NOTES

1. 1 Pet 3:15.
2. Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Redemptor Hominis, 14: AAS 71 (1979), 284 f.
3. Cf. Rom 8:19, 21; Eph 4:4; Phil 3:10f.; Tit 3:7; Heb 7:19; 1 Pet 1:13.
4. 1 Pet 3:15.
5. Cf. Mk 10:17-22; Mt 19:16-22; Lk 18:18-23.
6. Mk 10: 17-19.
7. Mk 10:20-21.
8. Mk 10:22.
9. Cf. Lk 8:49-56.
10. Cf. Lk 7:11-17.
11. Rev 21:6.
12. Jn 3:16.
13. 1 Jn 4:8,16.
14. Cf. 2 Thess 2:7.
15. Jn 14:9.

16. Cf. Heb 13:8.
17. Cf. Gen 1:26.
18. Jn 3:19; cf. 1:9.
19. Jn 1:5.
20. Rom 6:9.
21. Lk 2:34.
22. Jn 11:25.
23. Jn 3:16.
24. 1 Cor 7:31.
25. Heb 9:27.
26. Ibidem.
27. Jn 11:25-26.
28. Cf. Ex 34:1; Dt 9:10; 2 Cor 3:3.
29. Cf. Dt 4:5-9.
30. Mk 10:20.
31. Cf. Mt 5-7.
32. Cf. Mt 22:37-40; Mk 12:29-31; Lk 10:27.
33. Rom 2:14.
34. Rom 2:15.
35. Ibidem.
36. Mk 10:19.
37. Heb 9:27.
38. Col 3:14.

39. Cf. 1 Cor 13:13.

40. Cf. Mt 22:38.

41. "The moral law", Confucius says, "is not distant from us... The wise man does not make many mistakes regarding the moral law. He has as his principle: do not do to others what you would not wish done to you" (Chung Yung: Equilibrium and Norm, 13). A Japanese master of ancient times (Dengyo Daishi, also called Saicho, who lived 767-822 A.D.) urges people to be "forgetful of self, doers of good to others: this represents the summit of friendship and compassion" (cf. W. T. De Bary, Sources of Japanese Tradition, New York 1958, Vol I, p. 127). Nor can one fail to mention Mahatma Gandhi, who taught the "power of truth" (satyagraha), which conquers without violence by the dynamism intrinsic to just action.

42. Cf. Rom 2:15.

43. Cf. Jn 1:9; Second Vatican Council, Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate*, 2.

44. Gen 1:31.

45. Cf. Jn 2:25.

46. Cf. Lk 22:61.

47. Cf. Eph 1:4.

48. Mt. 19:20.

49. 1 Cor 7:31.

50. Col 3:1.

51. Rom 5:5.

52. Cf. Mt 5:3-12.

53. Mt 19:21.

54. Cf. Mk 10:21; Jn 1:43; 21:29.

55. Cf. Mt 19:12.

56. Cf. e.g. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Redemptionis Donum*: AAS 76 (1984), 513-546.

57. Mt. 9:3,7.

58. Mt. 9:37f.
59. Cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 39-42.
60. Cf. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 43-44.
61. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 1.
62. Jn 4:10.
63. Mt 5:8.
64. Cf. 1 Jn 4:8, 16.
65. Cf. Eph 5:32.
66. Cf. 1 Cor 13:4, 5, 6, 7.
67. Gen 2:24; cf. Mt. 19:5.
68. Ex 20:12; Dt 5:16; Mt 15:4.
69. Cf. Mt 25:14-30; Lk 19:12-26.
70. Gen 3:19.
71. Jn 8:32.
72. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Laborem Exercens*, 9: AAS 73 (1981), 599f.
73. Cf. Lk 21:19.
74. Message for the World Day of Peace 1985, No. 3: AAS 77 (1985), 163.
75. Lk 17:1-2.
76. Lk 2:52.
77. Cf. e.g. Ps 104[103]; Ps 19[18]; Ws 13:1-9; 7:15-20.
78. Pr 4:5-7.
79. Cf. 1 Cor 9:24-27.

80. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 24.

81. 1 Jn 2:13-14.

82. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

83. 1 Jn 2:13-14.

84. 1 Jn 5:4.

85. Cf. Saint Augustine, *Confessions* I, 1: CSEL 33, p. 1.

86. Second Vatican Council, Declaration on Christian Education *Gravissimum Educationis*, 2.

87. Cf. AAS 58 (1966), 18.

88. Jn 2:5.

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