



The Holy See

12th WORLD YOUTH DAY

Baptismal Vigil with young people

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II

Longchamp

Saturday, 23 August 1997

Dear Young People, Dear Friends,

1. I begin by greeting all of you who are gathered here, and I do so with the words of the Prophet Ezekiel: for these words contain a marvellous promise from God and express the joy of your presence. "I will take you from the nations . . . a new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my decrees . . . you shall be my people, and I will be your God" (36:24-28).

2. I greet the French Bishops who are hosting us, and the Bishops from so many parts of the world. I also extend cordial greetings to the eminent representatives of the other Christian confessions with whom we share the same Baptism, and who have wished to take part in this Youth Celebration.

On the eve of 24 August we cannot forget the sad Massacre of Saint Bartholomew's Day, an event of very obscure causes in the political and religious history of France. Christians did things which the Gospel condemns. If I speak of the past, it is because "acknowledging the weaknesses of the past is an act of honesty and courage which helps us to strengthen our faith, which alerts us to face today's temptations and challenges and prepares us to meet them" (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 33). Therefore I willingly support the initiatives of the French Bishops, for, with them, I am convinced that only forgiveness, offered and received, leads little by little to a fruitful dialogue, which will in turn ensure a fully Christian reconciliation. Belonging to different religious traditions must not constitute today a source of opposition and tension. Quite the contrary, our common love for Christ impels us to seek tirelessly the path of full unity.

3. The liturgical texts of our Vigil are, in part, the same as those used for the Easter Vigil. They speak of Baptism. The Gospel of Saint John recounts Christ's night-time conversation with Nicodemus. Having come in search of Christ, this member of the Sanhedrin declares his faith: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him" (3:2). Jesus answers him: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (3:3). Nicodemus asks him: "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (3:4). Jesus replies: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (3:5-6).

Jesus makes Nicodemus pass from things visible to things invisible. Each one of us is born of man and woman, of a father and a mother; this birth is the point of departure of our whole existence. Nicodemus is thinking in terms of this natural event. On the other hand, Christ came into the world to reveal a different birth, the spiritual birth. When we profess our faith we proclaim who Christ is: "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father (*consubstantialis Patri*). Through him all things were made (*per quem omnia facta sunt*). For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man (*descendit de caelis et incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto ex Maria virgine et homo factus est*). Yes, young friends, the Son of God became man for you, for each one of you!

4. "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (Jn 3:5). Thus, in order to enter the Kingdom, a person must be born anew, not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. Baptism is precisely the sacrament of this birth. The Apostle Paul gives a profound explanation of this in the passage from the Letter to the Romans which we have heard: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (6:3-4). The Apostle gives us here the meaning of this new birth; he shows why the sacrament of Baptism takes place by immersion into water. This is not a merely symbolic immersion into the life of God. Baptism is the concrete and effective sign of immersion into Christ's Death and Resurrection. We understand, then, why tradition has linked Baptism to the Easter Vigil. It is on that day, and above all on that night, that the Church re-lives Christ's death, that the Church as a whole is caught up in the cataclysm of that death from which a new life will burst forth. Therefore, the Vigil, in the precise meaning of the word, is an act of waiting: the Church awaits the Resurrection; she awaits the life which will be victorious over death and will lead man into life.

Everyone who receives this Baptism is given a share in Christ's Resurrection. Saint Paul returns often to this theme which sums up the essence of the true meaning of Baptism. He writes: "If we

have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Rom 6:5). And also: "We know that our old self is crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom 6:6-11). With Paul, dear young people, you say to the world: our hope is steadfast; through Christ we live for God.

5. In recalling this evening the Easter Vigil, we are touching upon fundamental questions: life and death, mortality and immortality. In the history of humanity Jesus Christ has reversed the meaning of human existence. If everyday experience shows us this existence as a passage towards death, the Paschal Mystery opens to us the perspective of a new life beyond death. That is why the Church, which professes her belief in Jesus' death and resurrection, has every reason to speak these words: "We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come".

6. Dear young people, do you know what the sacrament of Baptism does to you? God acknowledges you as his children and transforms your existence into a story of love with him. He conforms you to Christ so that you will be able to fulfil your personal vocation. He has come to make a pact with you and he offers you his peace. Live from now on as children of the light who know that they are reconciled by the Cross of the Saviour!

Baptism — "mystery and hope of the world to come" (Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, *Procatechesis* 10, 12) — is the most beautiful of God's gifts, inviting us to become disciples of the Lord. It brings us into intimacy with God, into the life of the Trinity, from this day forward and on into eternity. It is a grace given to the sinner, a grace which purifies us from sin and opens to us a new future. It is a bath which washes and regenerates. It is an anointing which conforms us to Christ, Priest, Prophet and King. It is an enlightenment which illumines our path and gives it full meaning. It is a vestment of strength and perfection. Dressed in white on the day of our Baptism, as we shall be on the last day, we are called to preserve every day its bright splendour and to discover it anew, through forgiveness, prayer and Christian living. Baptism is the sign that God has joined us on our journey, that he makes our existence more beautiful and that he transforms our history into a history of holiness.

You have been called, chosen by Christ to live in the freedom of the children of God; you have been confirmed in your baptismal vocation by the Holy Spirit who dwells in you, in order that you may proclaim the Gospel all your lives. In receiving Confirmation, you commit yourselves to using all your strength in order to make the gift which you have received grow step by step through the reception of the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist and Penance which sustain in us the life received at Baptism. As baptized individuals, you bear witness to Christ by your concern for a life that is upright and faithful to the Lord, maintained by means of a spiritual and moral struggle. Faith

and moral behaviour are linked. In fact, the gift received leads us to a permanent conversion, so that we might imitate Christ and be worthy of the divine promise. The word of God transforms the lives of those who accept it, because it is the rule of faith and action. In their lives, in order to respect fundamental values, Christians also experience that suffering which can result from moral choices opposed to worldly behaviour and which therefore can be heroic. But this is the price of the life of blessed happiness with the Lord. Dear young people, this is the price of your witness. I count on your courage and fidelity.

7. It is in the midst of your brothers and sisters that you are to live as Christians. In Baptism God has given us a mother, the Church, with whom we grow spiritually in order that we may walk the path of holiness. This sacrament incorporates you as members of a people, it makes you sharers in the life of the Church and gives you brothers and sisters to love, in order that you might be "one in Christ" (Gal 3:28). In the Church, no longer are there borders; we are one people standing together, made up of many groups with different cultures, attitudes and modes of behaviour, in communion with the Bishops, the pastors of the flock. This unity is a sign of richness and vitality. In diversity, your first concern must be for unity and fraternal cohesion, which will enable personal development to take place in a serene way and allow the whole body to grow.

Baptism and Confirmation, however, do not remove us from the world, for we share the joys and hopes of people today and we make our contribution to the human community, in the life of society and in every technical and scientific field. Thanks to Christ, we are close to all of our brothers and sisters, and we are called to show the profound joy which is found in living with him. The Lord calls us to undertake our mission right where we are, for "the place which God has assigned to us is so beautiful that we may never abandon it" (cf. *Epistle to Diognetus* VI, 10). Whatever we do, our existence is for the Lord: that is our hope and our title to glory. In the Church, the presence of young people, catechumens and newly baptized is a great treasure and a source of vitality for the whole Christian community, called to account for its faith and to bear witness to that faith to the ends of the earth.

8. One day, at Capernaum, when many of the disciples left Jesus, Peter responded to Jesus' question: "Do you also wish to go away?", by saying: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (cf. Jn 6:67,68). At this World Youth Day in Paris, one of the capitals of the modern world, the Successor of Peter comes to tell you once more that these words of the Apostle must be the beacon which enlightens you on your journey. "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (Jn 6:68). More still: not only do you speak to us of eternal life, but you yourself are that life. Truly, you are "the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6).

9. Dear young people, by your baptismal anointing you have become members of the holy people. By your anointing at Confirmation you share fully in the Church's mission. The Church, of which you are a part, has confidence in you and is counting on you. May your Christian lives be a progressive "getting used to" life with God, according to the beautiful expression of Saint Irenaeus,

so that you may be missionaries of the Gospel!

At the end of the Vigil, the Holy Father greeted English-speaking pilgrims:

To all the English-speaking young people who are in attendance at this evening Vigil I extend a special greeting. Remember that you are never alone, Christ is with you on your journey every day of your lives! He has called you and chosen you to live in the freedom of the children of God. Turn to him in prayer and in love. Ask him to grant you the courage and strength to live in this freedom always. Walk with him who is "the Way, the Truth and the Life"!

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