



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO THE YOUNG PEOPLE GATHERED IN THE VATICAN BASILICA

Wednesday, 28 February 1979

Dear Boys and Girls,

1. I wish to address to each of you, in the first place, a cordial greeting and sincere thanks. This presence of yours, so numerous and gay, is a significant testimony of the love that binds you to the Pope, in whom you recognize, with enlightened and penetrating faith, the Vicar of Christ.

It is easy for me, therefore, to begin the talk with you, a simple, familiar talk which I would like each of you to feel as addressed to him personally.

The subject of our conversation today is suggested by the liturgical occasion of "Ash Wednesday". You know that on this day, with which the period of preparation for Easter begins, the Church puts ashes on the heads of the faithful and calls them to penitence. This word "penitence" returns in so many pages of Holy Scripture, it re-echoes on the lips of so many prophets and, finally, in a particularly eloquent way, on the lips of Jesus Christ himself: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt 3:2).

2. "Penitence" in the evangelical sense means, above all, this: "to be converted". Jesus contests the purely external way with which many of his contemporaries carried out their acts of repentance: charity, fasting, prayer. They neglected the real purpose of these acts, which was interior purification, necessary to be able to meet in the depths of conscience, "in the secrecy of the heart", with the merciful holiness of God.

Do you remember that extraordinary page of the Gospel according to Matthew? "Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do... that they may be praised by men...; do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in

secret; and your Father who *sees in secret* will reward you.

"And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites: for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men... But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who *sees in secret* will reward you" (Mt 6:2-6).

This is, therefore, the real meaning of every real "penitential" commitment: to withdraw from the current of exterior things, to silence the advancing hubbub of so many human voices, in order to return into oneself, into one's deepest inner life; because it is in the silence of conscience that God waits for us. When, in fact, Jesus says: "go into your room and shut the door", he does not call to an isolation that is an end in itself. That "shutting the door" corresponds to the one decisive opening of the human heart: the opening to God: "your Father who sees in secret will reward you". In the meeting with God there is the "reward", to which every human heart aspires: the experience of forgiveness and spiritual liberation.

3. Penitence, therefore, is not just effort; it is also joy. Sometimes, in fact, it is a great joy of the human spirit, a joy that cannot spring from other sources.

Does it not seem to you, dear boys and girls, that many of your contemporaries have lost, to a certain extent, the flavour of this joy? They have lost it, because they have mislaid the deep sense of that spiritual effort which makes it possible to find oneself again in the whole truth of one's own humanity. Our civilization, especially in the West

—connected as it is with the development of science and technique—glimpses the need of the intellectual and physical effort. It does not, on the other hand, sufficiently consider the importance of the effort necessary to recover and promote moral values, which constitute the most authentic inner life of man. And it pays for it with that sense of emptiness and confusion which the young feel especially, sometimes even dramatically.

The severe liturgy of "Ash Wednesday" and, subsequently, the whole period of Lent constitute a systematic call to the rediscovery of those values, and to renewed experience of that meeting with Christ which can alone give life its full meaning. Let us say so clearly: Lent is the path towards the joy of the meeting with the Risen Christ.

My wish is that each of you, and with you so many, so very many young people, will be able to take advantage of the opportunity offered by this period of the liturgical year in order to set out courageously.

With my Apostolic Blessing.

