



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE "YOUTH TOWARD ASSISI"

Dear Young People!

1. I welcome you with real joy at the end of your first international convention entitled: "Young People to Assisi", which took the form of a pilgrimage retracing the footprints of St Francis of Assisi. Welcome! I greet you all with affection.

I thank each of you for your contribution to the project's success; I thank the Minister General of the Friars Minor Conventual for his courteous words to me. In particular, I express my pleasure to the Friars Minor Conventual, who suggested this unusual pilgrimage as a pre-Jubilee experience in preparation for the 15th World Youth Day in 2000, which will be held in Rome about a year from now. I hope that they will always live their consecration as a gift which the Lord offers the Church and be faithful to the way of life bequeathed to the order by the *Poverello* of Assisi.

2. Dear young people, the path that has led you to places so dear to Marian and Franciscan spirituality was marked by moments of prayer, penance and reflective meetings. In Padua, Loreto and Assisi, you had the opportunity to visit important shrines of the faith in Italy and today your stop in Rome is a good way to finish your spiritual journey. You are guided by the question "Francis, why does the world follow you?". I am sure that, by listening to teachings and testimonies, you have received useful encouragement for a renewed commitment to the Gospel.

Today, following St Francis' example, you have come to meet the Pope to reaffirm your fidelity to the Church, which the saint said, "will keep the bonds of love and peace unharmed among us.... In her presence the holy observance of Gospel purity will always flourish and will never let the good fragrance of life vanish even for a moment" (2 *Celano* XVI, 24; *FF* 611).

Thank you for your visit! You have wished to give me, as St Francis gave my venerable

Predecessor Honorius III, a rule of Gospel life which you intend to practise, and have added a monetary donation, the fruit of your day of penance. I wholeheartedly thank you for this as well.

3. Your experience is now drawing to a close and, as you return home, you will be able to communicate what you experienced in these days to your peers. This pilgrimage has certainly been a providential opportunity for an encounter with Christ and with one another. It has enabled you to behold the face of God (cf. Ps 27: 8)) and his wonderful holiness, trusting in the healing power of his grace and mercy.

Be grateful to the Lord for having been guided by patient teachers who have led you spiritually step by step. Now, as you take roads in other directions, keep your heart docile to what God has to say. In resuming your normal occupations, spread to those around you the light which has illumined your spirit. Love and follow Christ! If the path becomes difficult at times and you are overcome by fatigue, rest in the shade of prayer. You will find peace and refreshment in dialogue with God.

The "witnesses" you have learned to know better and to love more will be your traveling companions. In Padua, in the basilica dedicated to him, you met St Anthony, a man of the Gospel who took the path of a patient and jealous visitation of God. In the Holy House of Loreto, the humble, receptive heart of Mary, the "Virgin become Church", as St Francis loved to call her (*Salutation of the BVM 1: FF 259*), set you before Christ Incarnate. In Assisi, Francis, a free and prayerful, merciful and fraternal heart, taught you to show compassion to all people and to all creatures. Taking up the scriptural invitation to "consider the outcome of their life, imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, and for ever!" (Heb 13: 7-8).

4. Dear young people, your itinerant meeting, which has touched on inspirational places and themes of faith, can be considered an anticipation of World Youth Day which, God willing, will be held here in Rome next year. I invite you all now to prepare for it. Falling in the middle of the Holy Year 2000, it will be an extraordinary opportunity for you young people: Christ wants you to work with him in building the new millennium according to his universal plan of salvation. Living the Gospel is certainly a demanding task, but only with Christ can we successfully build the *civilization of love*.

May Mary, Star of your journey, accompany you: may St Anthony, St Francis and St Clare protect you. For my part, I remain close to you in prayer.

Before leaving I would like to bless you now with the words of Scripture that Francis so loved and which you have certainly heard many times: "The Lord bless you and keep you! The Lord let his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you! The Lord look upon you kindly and give you peace!" (cf. Nm 6: 24-26; *FF 262*).

Castel Gandolfo, 28 August 1999

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