



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC VISIT OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO AZERBAIJAN AND BULGARIA

MEETING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER

Plovdiv Catholic Cathedral
Sunday, 26 May 2002

Dear Young Friends!

1. It is a special joy to meet with you this evening. I greet all of you with affection, and I thank those who have just welcomed me warmly on your behalf. At the end of my visit to the *Land of Roses*, this meeting of ours – because of your youthfulness and the enthusiasm of your welcome – is *a sign of Springtime*, opening us to the future. The beauty of the communion which binds us together in the love of Christ (cf. *Acts 2:42*) impels us all to put out confidently into the deep (cf. *Lk 5:4*), renewing our commitment to respond day by day to the gifts and tasks we have received from the Lord.

From the beginning of my service as the Successor of Peter, I have looked to you young people with great care and affection, because I am convinced that youth is *not just a time of transition* between adolescence and adulthood but a time of life given by God to each person *as a gift and a task*. It is a time to seek *the answer to fundamental questions*, like the young man in the Gospel (cf. *Mt 16:20*), and to discover not only the meaning of life but also a specific plan of life. Your personal, professional and social future will depend, dear young people, upon the choices you make in these years: youth is *the time to lay foundations*; an opportunity not to be missed, because it will never come again!

2. In this moment of your life, the Pope is happy to be with you in order *to listen respectfully to*

your anxieties and cares, your expectations and hopes. He is here among you *to share with you the certainty which is Christ*, the truth which is Christ, the love which is Christ. The Church looks to you with the greatest care, because she sees in you her own future and she puts her hope in you.

I imagine that you may be wondering *what the Pope wants to say to you* this evening before departing. It is this: I want to entrust to you *two messages*, two "words" spoken by Jesus who is the Word of the Father, and I hope that you will guard them as a treasure for the rest of your life (cf. *Mt 6:21*).

The first word is that "Come and see", spoken by Jesus to the two disciples who had asked him where he lived (cf. *Jn 1:38-39*). It is an invitation which has sustained and inspired the Church on her journey through the centuries. I repeat it to you today, dear friends. Draw near to Jesus and strive to *"see" what he is able to offer you*. Do not be afraid to cross the threshold of his dwelling, to speak with him face to face, as friends speak to each other (cf. *Ex 33:11*). Do not be afraid of the "new life" which he offers. In your parishes, in your groups and movements, place yourselves at the feet of the Master in order to make your life a response to the "vocation" which, in his love, he has always had in mind for you.

True, *Jesus is a demanding friend* who sets high goals and asks us to go out of ourselves in order to come to meet him: "Whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel's will save it" (*Mk 8:35*). This statement can seem difficult, and in some cases can even be frightening. But I ask you: is it better to resign yourself to a life without ideals, to a society marked by inequality, oppression and selfishness, or rather to seek with a generous heart what is true, good and just, working to build a world which shows forth the beauty of God, even at the price of having to face the many difficulties which this brings?

3. *Knock down the barriers of superficiality and fear!* Talk to Jesus in prayer and listen to his word. Taste the joy of reconciliation in the Sacrament of Penance. Receive his Body and Blood in the Eucharist, so that you can then welcome him and serve him in your brothers and sisters. *Do not yield to the deceits and easy illusions of the world*, which very often turn into tragic delusions.

You know that it is at difficult moments and trying times that the quality of our choices is measured. *There are no short cuts to happiness and light!* Only Jesus can supply answers which are neither illusion nor delusion!

With a sense of duty and sacrifice, therefore, take the path of conversion, of inner growth, of professional commitment, of voluntary work, of dialogue, of respect for all, never surrendering in the face of difficulties or failures, in the full knowledge that your strength is in the Lord, who guides your steps with love (cf. *Neh 8:10*).

4. The second word that I want to leave with you this evening is the one I have addressed to the

young people of the world who are preparing to celebrate World Youth Day in two months time in Toronto, Canada: "You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world" (cf. *Mt* 5:13-14).

In Scripture, *salt* is a symbol of the covenant between man and God (cf. *Lev* 2:13). By Baptism, the Christian shares in this pact which endures for ever. Salt is also a *sign of hospitality*: "Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another" (*Mk* 9:50). To be the salt of the earth means to be a *channel of peace and a witness to love*. Salt is also used to *preserve food*, to give it flavour, and it becomes a symbol of endurance and immortality: to be salt of the earth means to be *the bearer of an eternal promise*. Yet again: salt has *healing power* (cf. *2 Kgs* 2:20-22), which makes it an image of inner purification and conversion of the heart. Jesus himself speaks of the salt of purifying and redeeming suffering (cf. *Mk* 9:49): the Christian is a witness on earth of the salvation won *through the Cross*.

5. The symbolism of *light* is equally rich: a lamp gives *light, warmth and joy*. "Your word is a lamp for my steps and a light for my path", the faith of the Church declares in prayer (*Ps* 118:105). Jesus, the Word of the Father, is the inner light that dispels the darkness of sin; he is the fire that drives away all cold; he is the flame that gives joy to life; he is the splendour of truth which, shining before us, leads us on our way. Those who follow him do not walk in darkness, but have the light of life. Thus the disciple of Jesus must be a disciple of the light (cf. *Jn* 3:20-21; 8:12).

"You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world". Never have words at the same time so simple and so exalted been spoken to man! Certainly, *it is Christ alone who can be fully called salt of the earth and light of the world*, for only he can give flavour, strength and durability to our life which, without him, would be insipid, feeble and ephemeral. He alone can give us light, warmth and joy.

But it is he who wants you to share in his own mission and who therefore in no uncertain terms speaks these words of fire to you: "You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world". In the mystery of the Incarnation and Redemption, Christ makes himself one with every Christian and puts the light of Life and the salt of Wisdom into the depths of the Christian heart, sharing with those who welcome him the power to become a child of God (cf. *Jn* 1:12) and the duty to bear witness to this intimate presence and this hidden light.

Therefore, accept *with humble courage* what God sets before you. In his great power and tenderness, *he calls you to be saints*. It would be foolish to vaunt such a call, but it would be reckless to refuse it. It would be condemning yourself to failure in life. Léon Bloy, a French Catholic writer of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, wrote that "there is only one sadness, that of not being saints" (*La femme pauvre*, II, 27).

6. Never forget, young friends: you are called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world! Jesus does not ask you just to *say* or *do* something; Jesus asks you to *be* salt and light! And not

just for a day, but for your whole life. It is a task that he puts before you every morning and in every setting. You must *be* salt and light with your family and friends; with other young people – Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim – with whom you have daily contact wherever you study, work or relax. It is also up to you to build a society where all people can find their proper place and where their dignity and freedom is recognized and respected. Do your part, so that day by day Bulgaria will be more and more *a land of hospitality, prosperity and peace*.

Each of you is responsible for the choices you make. Nothing can be taken for granted, as you well know. Jesus himself speaks of possible infidelity: "If salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?" (Mt 5:13). Dear young people, never forget that when dough fails to rise, *it is not the fault of the dough but of the yeast*. When house is in darkness, it means that the light has been turned off. Therefore, "let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Mt 5:16).

7. Shining in splendour before us are the figures of the Blessed Martyrs of Bulgaria: Bishop Eugene Bossilkov, the Assumptionist Fathers Kamen Vitchev, Pavel Djidjov and Josaphat Chichkov. They knew what it meant to be salt and light in very hard and trying times for this country. They did not hesitate to give even their lives in order to stay faithful to the Lord who had called them. Their blood is still yielding a harvest in your land today; their dedication and their heroism are an example and inspiration for all.

I entrust you to their intercession, and I remind you of Blessed Pope John XXIII, who knew them personally and who so loved Bulgaria. I am sure that I express his view of young Bulgarians in his time when I say to you today: it is in following Jesus that your youthfulness *will achieve all its rich potential* and acquire its full meaning. It is in following Jesus that you will discover *the beauty of life lived as a free gift*, inspired by love alone. It is in following Jesus that you will taste even now *something of the joy that will be yours for ever in eternity*.

I embrace you all, and with great affection I bless you!

In Polish at the end he added:

May I say something in Polish? Why does the meeting with the young Bulgarians take place? Because I think that young people look more toward the future. I don't know if it will be given to me to return again to Bulgaria. It is wonderful to be able to meet with young Bulgarians at the end of my visit. Young people direct their vision more toward the future. With all my heart I formulate the prayer for Bulgaria and for all of you, that the future may belong to you. To you belongs tomorrow. I wish for your nation that it may be the best possible tomorrow. God bless young Bulgaria.

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