The Holy See

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS FOR THE THIRTY-THIRD WORLD YOUTH DAY 2018

"***Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God***" (*Lk* 1:30)

Dear young people,

World Youth Day 2018 represents another step in preparation for the international WYD due to take place in Panama in January 2019. This new stage of our pilgrimage falls in the same year that the Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops will meet on the theme: *Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment.* This is a happy coincidence. The focus, prayer and reflection of the Church will turn to you young people, with the desire to receive and, above all, to embrace the precious gift that you are to God, to the Church and to the world.

As you already know, we have chosen to be accompanied on this journey by the example and intercession of Mary, the young woman of Nazareth whom God chose as the Mother of his Son. She walks with us towards the Synod and towards the WYD in Panama. If last year we were guided by the words of her canticle of praise – "The Almighty has done great things for me" (*Lk* 1:49) – teaching us to remember the past, this year we seek, together with her, to listen to the voice of God who inspires courage and bestows the grace needed to respond to his call: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God" (*Lk* 1:30). These are the words addressed by God's messenger, the Archangel Gabriel, to Mary, an ordinary girl from a small village in Galilee.

1. *Do not be afraid!*

As is understandable, the sudden appearance of the angel and his mysterious greeting: "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you" (*Lk* 1:28), strongly *disturbed* Mary, who was surprised by this first

revelation of her identity and her vocation, as yet unknown to her. Mary, like others in the Sacred Scriptures, trembles before the mystery of God's call, who in a moment places before her the immensity of his own plan and makes her feel all her smallness as a humble creature. The angel, seeing the depths of her heart, says: "Do not be afraid"! God also reads our inmost heart. He knows well the challenges we must confront in life, especially when we are faced with the fundamental choices on which depend who we will be and what we will do in this world. It is the "shudder" that we feel when faced with decisions about our future, our state of life, our vocation. In these moments we are troubled and seized by so many fears.

And you young people, what are your *fears*? What worries you most deeply? An "underlying" fear that many of you have is that of not being loved, well-liked or accepted for who you are. Today, there are many young people who feel the need to be different from who they really are, in an attempt to adapt to an often artificial and unattainable standard. They continuously "photo-shop" their images, hiding behind masks and false identities, almost becoming *fake* selves. Many are obsessed by receiving as many "likes" as possible. Multiple fears and uncertainties emerge from this sense of inadequacy. Others fear that they will not be able to find an emotional security and that they will remain alone. Many, faced with the uncertainty of work, fear not being able to find a satisfactory professional position, or to fulfil their dreams. Today a large number of young people are full of fear, both believers and non-believers. Indeed, those who have accepted the gift of faith and seek their vocation seriously are not exempt from fears. Some think: perhaps God is asking or will ask too much of me; perhaps, by following the road he has marked out for me, I will not be truly happy, or I will not be able to do what he asks of me. Others think: if I follow the path that God shows me, who can guarantee that I will be able to follow it through? Will I become discouraged? Will I lose my enthusiasm? Will I be able to persevere for the whole of my life?

In moments when doubts and fears flood our hearts, *discernment* becomes necessary. It allows us to bring order to the confusion of our thoughts and feelings, to act in a just and prudent way. In this process, the first step in overcoming fears is to identify them clearly, so as not to find yourself wasting time and energy by being gripped by empty and faceless ghosts. And so, I invite all of you to look within yourselves and to "name" your fears. Ask yourselves: what upsets me, what do I fear most in this specific moment of my life today? What blocks me and prevents me from moving forward? Why do I lack the courage to make the important choices I need to make? Do not be afraid to face your fears honestly, to recognize them for what they are and to come to terms with them. The Bible does not ignore the human experience of fear nor its many causes. Abraham was afraid (cf. *Gen* 12:10ff), Jacob was afraid (cf. *Gen* 31:31; 32:7), and so were Moses (cf. *Ex* 2:14; 17:4), Peter (cf. *Mt* 26:69ff) and the Apostles (cf. *Mk* 4:38-40; *Mt* 26:56). Jesus himself, albeit in an incomparable way, experienced fear and anguish (cf. *Mt* 26:37; *Lk* 22:44).

"Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" (*Mk* 4:40). In admonishing his disciples Jesus helps us to understand how the obstacle to faith is often not *scepticism* but *fear*. Thus understood, the work of discernment identifies our fears and can then help us to overcome them, opening us to life

and helping us to calmly face the challenges that come our way. For us Christians in particular, fear must never have the last word but rather should be an occasion to make an act of faith in God… and in life! This means believing in the fundamental goodness of the existence that God has given us and trusting that he will lead us to a good end, even through circumstances and vicissitudes which often bewilder us. Yet if we harbour fears, we will become inward-looking and closed off to defend ourselves from everything and everyone, and we will remain paralyzed. We have to act! Never close yourself in! In the Sacred Scriptures the expression "do not be afraid" is repeated 365 times with different variations, as if to tell us that the Lord wants us to be free from fear, every day of the year.

Discernment is indispensable when searching for one's vocation in life. More often than not our vocation is not obvious or evident at first but rather something we come to understand gradually. Discernment, in this case, should not be seen as an individual effort at introspection, with the aim of better understanding our interior make-up so as to strengthen us and acquire some balance. In such instances the person can become stronger, but is still confined to the limited horizon of his or her possibilities and perspectives. Vocation, however, is a *call from above*, and discernment in this context principally means opening ourselves to the Other who calls. Prayerful silence is therefore required in order to hear the voice of God that resounds within our conscience. God knocks at the door of our hearts, as he did with Mary; he longs to establish friendship with us through prayer, to speak with us through the Sacred Scriptures, to offer us mercy in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and to be one with us in the Eucharist.

It is also important to dialogue with and encounter *others*, our brothers and sisters in the faith who have more experience, for they help us to see better and to choose wisely from the various possibilities. When the young Samuel hears the voice of the Lord, he does not recognize it immediately. Three times he runs to Eli, the older priest, who in the end proposes the right response to give to the Lord's call: "If he calls you, you shall say: 'Speak Lord, for your servant hears.'" (*1 Sam* 3:9). In your doubts know that you can rely on the Church. I know that there are very good priests, consecrated men and woman and lay faithful, many of whom are also young, who can support you like older brothers and sisters in the faith. Enlivened by the Holy Spirit, they will help you to make sense of your doubts and understand the plan of your own vocation. The *other* is not only a spiritual guide, but also the person who helps us open ourselves to the infinite riches of the life that God has given us. It is important to create spaces in our cities and communities to grow, to dream and to look at new horizons! Never lose the enthusiasm of enjoying others' company and friendship, as well as the pleasure of dreaming together, of walking together. Authentic Christians are not afraid to open themselves to others and share with them their own important spaces, making them spaces of fraternity. Dear young people, do not allow the spark of youth to be extinguished in the darkness of a closed room in which the only window to the outside world is a computer and smartphone. Open wide the doors of your life! May your time and space be filled with meaningful relationships, real people, with whom to share your authentic and concrete experiences of daily life.

2. Mary!

"I have called you by name" (*Is* 43:1). The first reason not to fear is the fact that God has called us *by name*. The angel, God's messenger, called Mary by name. To God belongs the power to give names. In the work of creation, he calls into existence every creature by name. There is an identity behind a name, that which is unique in every single thing, in every single person; that intimate essence that only God truly knows. This divine prerogative was shared with man when God invited him to name the animals, the birds and also his own offspring (*Gen* 2:19-21; 4:1). Many cultures share this profound biblical vision; they recognize in a name the revelation of the profound mystery of life and the meaning of existence.

When God calls someone by name, he also reveals to the person his vocation, his plan of holiness and fulfilment, through which the person becomes a gift to others and is made unique. And when God wants to expand the horizons of life, he gives a new name to the person he is calling, as he did with Simon, whom he called "Peter". From here comes the custom of taking a new name when entering a religious congregation, to indicate a new identity and mission. Since the divine call is unique and personal, we need the courage to disentangle ourselves from the pressure of being shaped by conforming patterns, so that our life can truly become an authentic and irreplaceable gift to God, to the Church and to all.

Dear young people, to be called by name is therefore a sign of our great dignity in the eyes of God and a sign of his love for us. God calls each one of you by name. All of you are *the "you" of God*, precious in his eyes, worthy of respect and loved (cf. *Is* 43:4). Welcome with joy this dialogue that God offers you, this appeal he makes to you, calling you by name.

3. You have found favour with God

The main reason why Mary need not be afraid is that she has found favour with God. The word "grace" speaks of love freely given, not owed. How much we are encouraged to know that we do not have to earn the closeness and help of God, by presenting a "*Curriculum Vitae* of excellence", full of merits and successes! The angel says to Mary that she has *already* found favour with God, not that she will obtain it in the future. And the same formulation of the angel's words helps us understand that divine grace is continuous, not something passing or fleeting; for this reason, it will never fail. Even in the future, the grace of God will always be there to sustain us, especially in moments of trial and darkness.

The continuous presence of divine grace encourages us to embrace our vocation with confidence; our vocation demands a commitment of faithfulness that needs to be renewed each day. Our vocational path is not without its crosses: not only our initial doubts, but also the frequent temptations that crop up along the way. The feeling of inadequacy accompanies Christ's disciple to the end. Yet he or she knows the help of God's grace.

The Angel's words descend upon our human fears, dissolving them with the power of the Good News of which we are heralds: our life is not pure chance or a mere struggle for survival, rather each of us is a cherished story loved by God. That we have "found grace in his eyes" means that the Creator sees a unique beauty in our being and that he has a magnificent plan for our lives. The awareness of this certainty, of course, does not resolve all our problems nor does it take away life's uncertainties. But it does have the power to transform our life deeply. The unknown that tomorrow holds for us is not a dark threat we need to overcome, but a favourable time given to us for living out the uniqueness of our personal vocation, and for sharing it with our brothers and sisters in the Church and in the world.

4. Courage in the present moment

From the certainty that God's grace is with us comes the strength to take courage in the present moment: the courage to carry forward what God asks of us here and now, in every area of our lives; courage to embrace the vocation which God reveals to us; courage to live out our faith without hiding or diminishing it.

Yes, when we open ourselves to God's grace, the impossible becomes a reality. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (*Rom* 8:31). God's grace touches the "now" of your lives, "takes hold" of you as you are, with all your fears and limits, but it also reveals his marvellous plans! You young people need to know that someone truly believes in you: please know that the Pope has confidence in you, that the Church has confidence in you! For your part, have confidence in the Church!

To the young Mary was entrusted an important task, precisely because she was young. You young people have strength as you go through a phase of your lives where energy is not lacking. Make use of this strength and this energy to improve the world, beginning with the realities closest to you. I want important responsibilities to be given to you within the Church; that there may be the courage to make space for you; and that you may be prepared to take on these responsibilities.

I invite you once again to contemplate Mary's love: a caring, dynamic and concrete love. A love full of boldness and focused completely on the gift of self. A Church permeated by these Marian qualities will always be a Church going forth, one that goes beyond her own limits and boundaries to let the grace she has received overflow. If we allow ourselves to be truly touched by Mary's example, we will live out authentically that charity which urges us to love God above all else and above ourselves, to love those with whom we share our daily life. And we will also love those who may seem hardly lovable in themselves. It is a love that is service and dedication, above all towards the weakest and poorest, love that transforms our faces and fills us with joy.

I would like to end with the beautiful words Saint Bernard used in a famous homily on the mystery

of the Annunciation, words that express the anticipation of all humanity for Mary's response: "You have heard, O Virgin that you will conceive and bear a son; you have heard that it will not be by man but by the Holy Spirit. The angel awaits an answer… We too, O Lady, are waiting for your word of compassion... In your brief response we are to be remade in order to be recalled to life… This is what the whole earth waits for, prostrate at your feet... Answer quickly, O Virgin" (*Sermon* 4, 8-9; *Opera Omnia*).

Dear young people, the Lord, the Church, the world are waiting for your answer to the unique call that each one receives in this life! As World Youth Day in Panama draws closer, I invite you to prepare yourselves for our gathering with the joy and enthusiasm of those who wish to participate in such a great adventure. WYD is for the courageous! Not for young people who are searching only for comfort and who withdraw whenever difficulties arise. Do you accept the challenge?

From the Vatican, 11 February 2018

VI Sunday of Ordinary Time
Memorial of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Lourdes

FRANCIS

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