



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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Reflection on the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela

1. "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life" (*Jn* 14: 6).

These words of Jesus Christ formed the theme of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, connected with the World Youth Day last Saturday and Sunday in the presence of hundreds of thousands of young people from Europe and throughout the world.

We must remember that the tradition of this Day had its origin on the occasion of the Jubilee of the Redemption, celebrated at Rome and throughout the Church from 25 March 1983 to 22 April 1984.

A huge multitude of young people assembled at Rome for Palm Sunday 1984. With the assistance of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, a thematic and pastoral programme which reflected the rich variety of the youth apostolate in the Church was drawn up for this meeting.

2. From then onwards, *Palm Sunday has been declared Youth Day* for the whole Church. Indeed, this day is particularly significant from the liturgical point of view; *Christ enters Jerusalem surrounded by young people* who recognize him as the Messiah.

Through the Paschal events at Jerusalem, the successive days of Holy Week have the purpose of developing to the full the truth of the Redeemer's messianic mission. *The Cross on Golgotha* and

then *the Resurrection* form the definitive call to follow Christ for all, especially for the young people.

3. One can say that the initiative for the Youth Day came *from the young people themselves*, who for some time had shown a particularly spontaneous and vivid awareness of the call of the paschal liturgy, especially that of Palm Sunday.

In many dioceses and parishes this very Sunday is Youth Day. In others, it is celebrated on another date according to circumstances. Apart from these local meetings, starting from the Year of the Redemption there developed the *tradition of Youth Day* on an international level. In 1985 this Day *was held at Rome* (in conjunction with the World Youth Day proclaimed by UNO). Two years later, on Palm Sunday 1987, the venue for the international meeting of the young people was transferred to *Buenos Aires in Argentina*.

This year a pressing invitation came from Spain, and the very ancient Shrine of *Santiago de Compostela* became the meeting place.

4. The choice of this city for this year's World Youth Day was not by mere chance. In fact, it must be considered in the centuries-old context of Christian pilgrimages. Beginning from the fourth century, with a growth that reached extraordinary proportions in the Middle Ages, a devotion to what were soon to be called "holy places" became popular within the Christian community. This form of *popular piety* has as its basic purpose spiritual renewal, purification from sin through *individual confession* and penance.

From all places and from every nation of the young Europe which was coming into existence thanks to its new religious identity, Christianity, pilgrims set out for the various *privileged centres of spiritual radiation*: Jerusalem, Rome, Loreto and other places of devotion. Among these, the "memorial of St James"; the shrine dedicated to the proto-martyr apostle, and constructed in 813 in Galicia, gradually came to acquire renown. The name of the city, "Compostela", which according to some accounts derives from the Latin "*campus stellae*" — the star which had miraculously led to the discovery of St James's body — has its own symbolic value. Centuries have passed, and at present as in the past this shrine continues to be a privileged beacon of Christian radiation for Europe, this old Europe which is facing an approaching important stage in its unification and the imminence of the third Christian millennium — a Europe which must again make Christ's Gospel its own!

5. *The World Youth Day at Santiago de Compostela made reference to these European traditions*. Although the sons and daughters of European countries formed the majority of the great crowd assembled there, nevertheless the other continents were represented; their groups, though smaller, were no less aware of the importance of the meeting in which they were participating.

This meeting grew *from the well defined basis of the Church's pilgrimage*, and particularly from the young people, who wished to take part in this pilgrimage. The pastoral care of youth bears fruit in the programme of events of these Days. Both the awareness and the apostolic attitude of the young people themselves bear fruit.

At the same time *the Youth Day is, in a certain sense*, a new initiative for this apostolate and for the pastoral care which serves it. Thanks to this, it takes the actual form of what, on the basis of the Second Vatican Council, is usually called "a new evangelization". It is clear that the young people themselves must become the leaders of this new evangelization.

6. This World Day was thoroughly prepared by various episcopal conferences, but especially by the national youth commissions existing in many countries, and all the work was coordinated by the Pontifical Council for the Laity.

During the days immediately preceding the World Day, an International Youth Forum with participants from over fifty countries was held in Santiago de Compostela. This intense preparatory work, together with the spiritual force of the pilgrimage, brought results greater than expected. The number of young people who went on pilgrimage to Santiago is estimated at over a half million. However, over and above the numbers and the external aspects of the demonstration, I should stress with deep appreciation both the irreplaceable work done on this occasion by so many priests and religious, especially as regards the spiritual preparation, in particular as regards Confessions, as well as, in general, the hidden but constant work of those animators who day after day accompanied the young people on their journey of spiritual growth, and supported them in their courageous commitment to follow Christ, "Way, Truth and Life".

7. Complementing the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela *was the visit to the Shrine of Our Lady of Covadonga*, in the Archdiocese of Oviedo. In this very part of Spain, the Asturias, *the task of freeing* the country from Arab occupation *was begun*. At the same time, it was a struggle to defend Christian values.

This took place in the eighth century with Don Pelayo.

In defending themselves against the invaders and reconquering their own land in the Iberian Peninsula, the ancestors of the present Spain in a certain sense together laid *a cornerstone of their national and Christian (Catholic) identity*.

The Shrine of Our Lady of Covadonga is intimately connected with all this important process, and remains as a cradle of Spanish Christianity and a symbol of its national identity.

8. The young people who came to Santiago de Compostela from various countries of Europe for the Youth Day are aware of the fact *that to begin a new evangelization means to refer to that*

beginning which happened centuries ago in various places in the continent. Christ is the cornerstone. It is he who said of himself: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life".

Building on him, let us find not only the way to the past of the peoples of Europe, but also the way to the future. This is "the way, the truth and the life" which is again proved to be the only valid way for the generations who, in the next millennium, will face the spotlight of history.

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