



The Holy See

15th WORLD YOUTH DAY

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II

VIGIL OF PRAYER

Tor Vergata, Saturday, 19 August 2000

1. "But who do you say that I am?" (*Mt 16:15*).

Dear young people, it is with great joy that I meet you again at this Prayer Vigil, during which we wish to listen together to Christ whom we feel present among us. It is he who is speaking to us.

"Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks his disciples this question near Caesarea Philippi. Simon Peter answers: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (*Mt 16:16*). The Master then turns to him with the surprising words: "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (*Mt 16:17*).

What is the meaning of this dialogue? Why does Jesus want to know what people think about him? Why does he want to know what his disciples think about him?

Jesus wants his disciples to become aware of what is hidden in their own minds and hearts and to give voice to their conviction. At the same time, however, he knows that the judgment they will express will not be theirs alone, because it will reveal what God has poured into their hearts by the grace of faith.

This event which took place near Caesarea Philippi leads us, in a sense, into the "school of faith". There the mystery of the origin and development of our faith is disclosed. First there is the grace of revelation: an intimate, ineffable self-giving of God to man. There then follows the call to respond. Finally there comes the human response, a response which from that point on must give meaning and shape to one's entire life.

This is what faith is all about! It is the response of the rational and free human person to the word of the living God. The questions that Jesus asks, the answers given by the Apostles, and finally by Simon Peter, are a kind of examination on

the maturity of the faith of those who are closest to Christ.

2. The conversation near Caesarea Philippi took place during the time leading up to the Passover, that is before Christ's passion and resurrection. We should also recall another event, when the Risen Christ checked the maturity of faith of his Apostles. This is the meeting with the Apostle Thomas. He was the only one not there when, after the resurrection, Christ came for the first time into the Upper Room. When the other disciples told him that they had seen the Lord, he would not believe it. He said: "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe" (*Jn 20:25*). A week later, the disciples were gathered together again and Thomas was with them. Jesus came through the closed door, and greeted the Apostles with the words: "Peace be with you" (*Jn 20:26*), and immediately he turned to Thomas: "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing" (*Jn 20:27*). Thomas then answered: "My Lord and my God!" (*Jn 20:28*).

The Upper Room in Jerusalem too was a kind of "school of faith" for the Apostles. However, in a sense, what happened to Thomas goes beyond what occurred near Caesarea Philippi. In the Upper Room we see a more radical dialectic of faith and unbelief, and, at the same time, an even deeper confession of the truth about Christ. It was certainly not easy to believe that the One who had been placed in the tomb three days earlier was alive again.

The divine Master had often announced that he would rise from the dead, and in many ways he had shown that he was the Lord of life. Yet the experience of his death was so overwhelming that people needed to meet him directly in order to believe in his resurrection: the Apostles in the Upper Room, the disciples on the road to Emmaus, the holy women beside the tomb. . . Thomas too needed it. But when his unbelief was directly confronted by the presence of Christ, the doubting Apostle spoke the words which express the deepest core of faith: If this is the case, if you are truly living despite having been killed, this means that you are "my Lord and my God".

In what happened to Thomas, the "school of faith" is enriched with a new element. Divine revelation, Jesus's question and man's response end in the disciple's personal encounter with the living Christ, with the Risen One. This encounter is the beginning of a new relationship between each one of us and Christ, a relationship in which each of us comes to the vital realization that Christ is Lord and God; not only the Lord and God of the world and of humanity, but the Lord and God of my own individual human life. One day Saint Paul would write: "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart: that is, the word of faith which we preach. Because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (*Rom 10:8-9*).

3. The readings of today's Liturgy describe the elements of the "school of faith" from which the Apostles emerged as people fully aware of the truth which God had revealed in Jesus Christ, the truth which would shape their personal lives and the life of the Church throughout history. This gathering in Rome, dear young people, is also a kind of "school of faith" for you, the disciples of today; it is the "school of faith" for all who proclaim Christ at the beginning of the Third Millennium.

You can all sense in yourselves the process of questions and answers that we have just been talking about. You can all measure the difficulties you have in believing, and even feel the temptation not to believe. But at the same time you can

also experience a slowly maturing sense and conviction of your commitment in faith. In fact, there is always a meeting between God and the human person in this wonderful school of the human spirit, the school of faith. The Risen Christ always enters the Upper Room of our life and allows each of us to experience his presence and to declare: You, O Christ, you are “my Lord and my God”.

Christ said to Thomas: “Because you have seen me, you have believed: blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe” (*Jn 20:29*). There is something of the Apostle Thomas in every human being. Each one is tempted by unbelief and each one asks the basic questions: Is it true that God exists? Is it true that he created the world? Is it true that the Son of God became man, died and rose from the dead? The answer comes as the person experiences God’s presence. We have to open our eyes and our heart to the light of the Holy Spirit. Then the open wounds of the Risen Christ will speak to each of us: “Because you have seen me, you have believed: blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe”.

4. Dear friends, to believe in Jesus today, to follow Jesus as Peter, Thomas, and the first Apostles and witnesses did, demands of us, just as it did in the past, that we take a stand for him, almost to the point at times of a new martyrdom: the martyrdom of those who, today as yesterday, are called to go against the tide in order to follow the divine Master, to follow “the Lamb wherever he goes” (*Rev 14:4*). It is not by chance, dear young people, that I wanted the witnesses to the faith in the twentieth century to be remembered at the Colosseum during this Holy Year.

Perhaps you will not have to shed your blood, but you will certainly be asked to be faithful to Christ! A faithfulness to be lived in the circumstances of everyday life: I am thinking of how difficult it is in today’s world for engaged couples to be faithful to purity before marriage. I think of how the mutual fidelity of young married couples is put to the test. I think of friendships and how easily the temptation to be disloyal creeps in.

I think also of how those who have chosen the path of special consecration have to struggle to persevere in their dedication to God and to their brothers and sisters. I think of those who want to live a life of solidarity and love in a world where the only things that seem to matter are the logic of profit and one’s personal or group interest.

I think too of those who work for peace and who see new outbreaks of war erupt and grow worse in different parts of the world; I think of those who work for human freedom and see people still slaves of themselves and of one another. I think of those who work to ensure love and respect for human life and who see life so often attacked and the respect due to life so often flouted.

5. Dear young people, in such a world is it hard to believe? Is it hard to believe in the Third Millennium? Yes! It is hard. There is no need to hide it. It is hard, but with the help of grace it can be done, as Jesus explained to Peter: “Neither flesh nor blood has revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven” (*Mt 16:17*).

This evening I will give you the Gospel. It is the Pope’s gift to you at this unforgettable vigil. The word which it contains is the word of Jesus. If you listen to it in silence, in prayer, seeking help in understanding what it means for your life from the wise counsel of your priests and teachers, then you will meet Christ and you will follow him, spending your lives day by day for him!

It is Jesus in fact that you seek when you dream of happiness; he is waiting for you when nothing else you find satisfies you; he is the beauty to which you are so attracted; it is he who provokes you with that thirst for fullness that will not let you settle for compromise; it is he who urges you to shed the masks of a false life; it is he who reads in your hearts your most genuine choices, the choices that others try to stifle. It is Jesus who stirs in you the desire to do something great with your lives, the will to follow an ideal, the refusal to allow yourselves to be grounded down by mediocrity, the courage to commit yourselves humbly and patiently to improving yourselves and society, making the world more human and more fraternal.

Dear young people, in these noble undertakings you are not alone. With you there are your families, there are your communities, there are your priests and teachers, there are so many of you who in the depths of your hearts never weary of loving Christ and believing in him. In the struggle against sin you are not alone: so many like you are struggling and through the Lord's grace are winning!

6. Dear friends, at the dawn of the Third Millennium I see in you the "morning watchmen" (cf. *Is* 21:11-12). In the course of the century now past young people like you were summoned to huge gatherings to learn the ways of hatred; they were sent to fight against one another. The various godless messianic systems which tried to take the place of Christian hope have shown themselves to be truly horrendous. Today you have come together to declare that in the new century you will not let yourselves be made into tools of violence and destruction; you will defend peace, paying the price in your person if need be. You will not resign yourselves to a world where other human beings die of hunger, remain illiterate and have no work. You will defend life at every moment of its development; you will strive with all your strength to make this earth ever more livable for all people.

Dear young people of the century now beginning, in saying "yes" to Christ, you say "yes" to all your noblest ideals. I pray that he will reign in your hearts and in all of humanity in the new century and the new millennium. Have no fear of entrusting yourselves to him! He will guide you, he will grant you the strength to follow him every day and in every situation.

May Mary most holy, the Virgin who said "yes" to God throughout her whole life, may Saints Peter and Paul and all the Saints who have lighted the Church's journey down the ages, keep you always faithful to this holy resolve!

To each and every one of you I offer my blessing with affection.

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