

PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE LAITY  
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THE CHRISTIAN EDUCATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE –  
A PRIORITY IN THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH  
Introduction to the topic

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### 1. Youth is a time to ask the big questions

In my introduction to today's sessions that will deal with the topic of *the Christian education of young people – a priority in the mission of the Church*, I would like to draw your attention to Pope Benedict XVI's message to youth in 2009. The theme of the message was "*We have set our hope on the living God*" (1 Tm 4:10).<sup>1</sup>

In this message, the pope speaks of youth as a time of life in which we are searching. "When we are young we cherish ideals, dreams and plans. Youth is the time when decisive choices concerning the rest of our lives come to fruition. Perhaps this is why it is the time of life when fundamental questions assert themselves strongly: Why am I here on earth? What is the meaning of life? What will my life be like? And again: How can I attain happiness? Why is there suffering, illness and death? What lies beyond death?"<sup>2</sup>

In other words, youth is the time to ask the *big questions* we come across in life, and consequently, youth is the time to receive the *big answers*. In German we can speak of a "*Zeitfenster*", meaning "time frame" or "window of opportunity", a special time to receive the big answers.<sup>3</sup>

I would like to point out that young people in the Church who have been baptised, have received their first Communion and are confirmed, have a right to hear the answers that the pope gives to their existential questions. This implies a duty that should be fulfilled by not only parents, family or godparents, but also the whole community of believers. *Christifideles Laici* tells us that the right to an education in the faith must be met.<sup>4</sup>

Our topic today is quite right in saying that this is a priority in the mission of the Church. This mission is not limited to the ecclesiastical "institution", bishops and priests, but it is a priority for the whole Church.<sup>5</sup> The teaching of the young is the responsibility of the whole community

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<sup>1</sup>BENEDICT XVI, Message to the youth of the world on the occasion of the 24<sup>th</sup> World Youth Day, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, 58.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *CL*, 34.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *CL*, 61, 63.

of believers and each individual according to their possibilities. Let us not delude ourselves – if we do not provide answers to their questions, they will find answers elsewhere. Other people or institutions of various kinds in society can influence them directly or indirectly.

## **2. Teaching, the community of believers, and unity of life**

How can we carry out this great responsibility, and how can we be part of this challenge to teach our young people? I would like to highlight three aspects that are ways that we can all undertake. The first is the teaching of doctrine. This is the “second” proclamation, learning more about the faith (*fides quae*). I shall return to this aspect later.

The second aspect involves us all personally. It is the invitation to young people to participate in the life of the Church.<sup>6</sup> This means that we ourselves are active participants in this life of communion, in the liturgical and sacramental life of the parish, and in cultural and charitable activities of youth groups, movements or new communities. I realise that this is not easy, but all the faithful must do their part. We must all be living signs and “open doors” that attract young people to be part of a vibrant Church.

The third aspect is connected to this. It is education in the faith. It is personal testimony of the newness and beauty of a meeting with Christ through an authentic Christian life in which faith is lived out in an integral way.<sup>7</sup>

This third way has acquired particular importance nowadays, The *martyria*, confessing the faith and suffering for the faith, leaves no space for doubt and mistaken interpretations. The ancient Romans used to say: “*Verba docent - exempla trahunt*”.<sup>8</sup> The force of attraction (*trahere*) of personal example has an extraordinary power to convince, something that words alone have difficulty in achieving nowadays.<sup>9</sup>

We are not referring to “heroic” lives, but of commitment that is visible and tangible in a life of faith, and that strives to live a unity of life in witnessing to revealed truth and the good that has been received. This life of faith responds positively to the gift of life, to other human beings and to God’s creation. However, in today’s world we also have to say “no” and to refuse to act in a way that is irreconcilable with our faith, even though many might think that it is “normal” or “inevitable”.

WYD teaches us that very often it is young people who convey the faith to other young people.<sup>10</sup> I feel that this is a very good example of ecclesial communion. The natural simplicity and example of their peers speaks louder than the long arguments presented by many of the sects.

## **3. The teaching of doctrine**

After having emphasised the essential role of personal example, I would like to point to the

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. *CL*, 60ff.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *CL*, 34, 59.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Lucius Annaeus *Seneca, Epistulae ad Lucilium*, 6,5: “*Longum iter est per praecepta, breve et efficax per exempla.*”

<sup>9</sup> Cf. PAUL VI, Apostolic Letter *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

<sup>10</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Message to the youth of the world on the occasion of the 4<sup>th</sup> World Youth Day, 1989.

importance of teaching doctrine and of a good knowledge of the faith.<sup>11</sup> Nowadays there is a huge marketplace of convictions and opinions, and this demands that we have a good knowledge of the faith so that we can give a reason for it to others (cf. *1Pet* 3:15).

We are fortunate that we have, at the level of the universal Church, four instruments that we can all use. Since 1992 we have had the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and since 2005 we have its *Compendium*. That same year the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* came out, and then in 2011 there was *Youcat: Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which was a gift from the pope to all those taking part in WYD 2011 in Madrid.

Pope Benedict XVI says in the preface to *Youcat*: “The youth of today are not as superficial as some think. They want to know what life is really all about... This book is exciting because it speaks of our own destiny and so deeply engages every one of us... This Catechism was not written to please you. It will not make life easy for you, because it demands of you a new life. It places before you the Gospel message as the “pearl of great value” (*Mt* 13:46) for which you must give everything. So I beg you: Study this Catechism with passion and perseverance. Make a sacrifice of your time for it! Study it in the quiet of your room; read it with a friend; form study groups and networks; share with each other on the Internet. By all means continue to talk with each other about your faith”.<sup>12</sup>

The pope continues: “You need to know what you believe. You need to know your faith with that same precision with which an IT specialist knows the inner workings of a computer. You need to understand it like a good musician knows the piece he is playing. Yes, you need to be more deeply rooted in the faith than the generation of your parents so that you can engage the challenges and temptations of this time with strength and determination...”<sup>13</sup>

Let us all follow this path suggested by Pope Benedict XVI, a true teacher of the faith. Even as a student at the Higher School of Theology and Philosophy in Freising in Bavaria, he recognised his teaching gift and his duty to pass on the faith to younger generations. As a young Bavarian priest, he tried to give life to his faith, and we are all witnesses of how he persisted in that commitment.

I believe that WYD has made a real contribution to the universal Church and to the task of educating the younger generations. WYD as a whole has a strong educational dimension. Those six days contain the three elements of education: *teaching* is to be found in the bishops’ catecheses and the pope’s homilies; an *experience* of the community of believers is present in the daily eucharistic celebrations, the Opening Mass, the Way of the Cross, the Vigil and the Closing Mass; *witness* can be easily seen in so many people and in the commitment of the volunteers – young and not-so-young – who help the WYD pilgrims in logistical matters and in any emergency.

We should allow ourselves to be moved by the Holy Father’s endeavours and by those of so many of the *christifideles* – lay people and ordained. Let us renew our efforts in doing our part in educating the younger generations in our common faith.

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. *CL*, 60; BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic Letter “*Motu Proprio data*” *Porta Fidei* for the proclamation of the Year of Faith, 11 October 2011.

<sup>12</sup> BENEDICT XVI, Preface to *Youcat*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2011.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*