

***Youth ministry today:
What response to the expectations of the Church and of young people?***

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During this international meeting, we have had the opportunity to exchange views, to dialogue and to study a certain number of important issues concerning World Youth Day, based on our experience in Toronto last summer and with a view to the preparations for the next world meeting of youth scheduled to take place in Cologne in 2005. We have also reflected and shared our thoughts about the challenges, difficulties and priorities of youth ministry for today and for the future. The interventions and exchanges were rich in content. Thanks to the large number of delegates present, many countries and diverse ecclesial communities are represented here and our horizons are widened. We have learned much from each other that will help us in our mission in the service of youth.

To give a concluding talk after several days of intensive and tiring work is a delicate task, and also because many of the answers have been given just now when the workgroups shared the conclusions of their group work. Rather than try to give a summary, I propose to present a reflection that will carry forward from our discussions and that will include some aspects that I consider to be particularly important: *what kind of youth ministry is needed now and in the future?*

To try to answer this question, I propose to take it from a different angle, beginning with an analysis of the expectations of youth and the reasons for the "success" of WYD for almost twenty years. I am convinced that WYD both reveals the expectations of youth and very aptly responds to them. I shall draw some conclusions from this simple statement by introducing proposals for "ordinary" pastoral ministry in which you are engaged. I shall take it in three stages. First of all I shall underscore several essential points that characterise the expectations of the youth of this generation (I); then I shall select some key elements of World Youth Day, conceived and experienced as education [pedagogy] in the faith (II); finally I shall propose some priorities that I regard as fundamental for the future (III).

I. WYD "reveals" the expectations of youth

1) The young people who flock in large numbers to WYD are very different in their origins and beliefs. Whether they are Catholics by birth, newly converted, agnostics, or New Age followers, they all share the same desire to search for happiness and the meaning of their existence. They are in search of points of reference, and they show their need to be instructed, guided and to receive clarification on the intellectual, moral and doctrinal levels. Although some of them are distant from the Church, they accept that the teachings of the Pope are demanding and unwavering because they recognise him as a true father who takes care to guide them along the paths of life, and who also

knows how to listen to them, encourage them and love them. These young people are touched by the serene strength with which the Holy Father gives witness, in spite of fatigue and infirmities. They perceive the startling contrast between his physical weakness and the inner strength that moves him, particularly as he is not afraid to show himself as he is. Young people admire this Pope because in their eyes he demonstrates a "virile" Christianity and he resolutely struggles for the faith and for human dignity. They find him credible because he is seen to be totally given to God and humankind by giving himself completely and with utmost courage.

2) The paradox of WYD success with the John Paul II generation is precisely the fact that the expectations of these young people are all the greater when their needs are many and their weaknesses show through. The ambivalence that characterises the younger generations and that was often mentioned in the workgroups, is something that I regard as a source of hope rather than discouragement. If we look at the other side of the coin, the "weak points" we note in today's youth are also their "strong points", and this reveals the extent of their needs and desires. These young people generally know very little about their faith and live cut off from their Christian roots because their parents have not always considered religion as a precious heritage that they should transmit to them. Many of these young people have never been baptised nor have they received religious instruction. A large number of them have suffered from the separation of their parents and have grown up in broken families. They know what it is to be lonely. As they are young, they want to believe in happiness and cannot accept the bitter fruit of scepticism and despair that comes with an aging society, full of doubt and fear.

We could say that this generation is "mystical" because, in their search for the essential, their hearts are unreservedly open to God. It is also a generation well inserted in the times. They can laugh and enjoy themselves, and also show their generosity and solidarity with the destitute. These young people wish to be engaged in working for others, and they see that voluntary service is a special way to deepen one's faith. They respond to the distress of humanity, but they cannot be satisfied with a humanism without God. These young people feel distant from a Church that they feel is more concerned with its internal organisation than in the well-being of humanity and the fundamental questions of existence. They are disappointed by the Church when they have the impression that it is abandoning its reasons for belief and hope. However, young people love the Church when it joyfully gives witness of its faith.

This brief analysis helps us to better understand how World Youth Day "reveals" - in the photographic sense of the term - the hidden expectations that young people are not always able to express back home in their usual milieus.

II. WYD: a response to the expectations of youth

The second part of my reflection concerns the "pedagogy" or educational methods used in World Youth Day: to identify the key elements and therefore better understand why young people respond so positively to the Holy Father's invitation, even if they are not always conscious of their reasons for joining. The method used could be summarised by saying that WYD was conceived, prepared and experienced as a festive celebration of faith with lively liturgies and wholesome teachings. They are also intense occasions of communion and discovery of the universal Church, with numerous enriching encounters and an opening up to the wider world. WYD is a stimulus for ordinary Christian life and for evangelisation.

1) WYD is a great festive celebration of faith

When young people are asked what impressed them most about WYD, two phrases are frequently repeated: "faith experience" and "the joy of believing".

The programme of WYD is conceived as a pilgrimage in which catecheses form an essential part. More and more youth are taking part in this three-day catechesis programme that develops the theme chosen by the Holy Father based on the Word of God. The objective is to build the foundations of their faith by helping them to have a personal encounter with Christ, and to follow a road of conversion, especially through the sacrament of reconciliation. The catecheses are also occasions for fruitful dialogue between the young people and the bishops.

The sacrament of reconciliation and penance, taking place individually with a priest, as we have said, is a fundamental element in the spiritual path offered to the young people during WYD. In Rome and Toronto, it was impressive to see the long lines of youth waiting for a confessor at the Circo Massimo and at Duc in Altum Park, while others remained in silence in these public places to adore the Blessed Sacrament or to venerate the WYD Cross.

The Eucharistic celebrations were also among the great moments of WYD that the youth particularly appreciated. In general, the liturgies are the essential elements of this "education in the faith" when they are joyful, recollected, lively and prayerful. The younger generations do not want to be satisfied with a religion that they follow out of duty, because they have had, and want to have, an experience of joy and believing. Their joy comes from a personal encounter with Christ. Its source is in the realisation that they are personally loved by God. It is the joy of salvation that is deepened in prayer and the sacraments, and also in an experience of Church where they discover its unity (around the Holy Father) and its diversity (with the youth of the whole world).

2) WYD is an occasion of deep communion with the universal Church

The encounter between the Pope and the youth is a determining factor of WYD. *"Young people and the Pope. Together"* is the well-known WYD motto. John Paul II gathers and unites this diversified and colourful crowd of youngsters. His presence is a visible sign of the unity and communion of the Church and it reinforces the awareness and joy of the young people in belonging to a fervent and lively Church.

Communion lived beyond differences in culture, language and nationality is by far the best way to discover the catholicity, i.e. the universality, of the Church. WYD is therefore a true lesson in communion for young people and a concrete parable of peace and reconciliation, irrespective of frontiers.

The younger generations, as you know, are particularly sensitive to the phenomenon of globalisation, and they do not hesitate to publicly manifest their disagreement with a particular concept of globalisation based on the primacy of economic and financial criteria. In this great modern debate, WYD allows youth to discover and experience the cultural and religious dimension of globalisation. Too often this is unknown to the wider public and the media, even though the Church has been living and promoting it since Pentecost! From this point of view, WYD is a source of hope. It reveals a vision of globalisation based on the inestimable worth of the human person. It shows up the positive aspects of globalisation that should be humanised and "christianised" in order to be put at the service of essential values like the dignity of every human being, solidarity and the common good.

3) WYD is a wonderful stimulus for Christian life and evangelisation

WYD is a "tonic" for the young people who participate. In these large gatherings, they realise that they are not alone as Christians and that they do not belong to a dying breed. Nowadays, young Christians are often in the minority. In some countries in Africa and Asia they are even attacked or persecuted because of their faith. In other continents, as in western Europe and North America, they live in a secularised society where the Church lacks "visibility". Affirmed in their faith and hope, they return home with a desire to give witness. After this revitalising experience, they feel better armed to resist the temptation to give up when they feel isolated in their universities and offices. They are stronger and able to resist the virus of discouragement and despair that has contaminated the Church and society in certain regions of the world. Many young people get back their joy and pride in being Christians. World Youth Days make them realise that it is possible to affirm their faith with simplicity, without arrogance and without complexes.

By allowing them to experience the community and ecclesial dimensions of faith, WYD manifests the new state of mind now current among the younger generations. In the countries of "old Christianity", the Church used to be a sort of precondition for faith. Nowadays the opposite happens. It is experience of faith that generally leads to the Church. Young people want to believe, but they are reticent about belonging to an institution. There is certainly a return to religious fervour, but also with the risks of exoticism and syncretism. WYD has thrown light on the fact that the new generations allow themselves to be evangelised without reserve. They display a thirst for the absolute that demands clear answers, that takes into account the religious dimension of existence and that does not hide its specific Christian dimension. Unlike their parents who were generally Catholics by tradition if not by convention, these young people have to make a free choice to live as Christians in a world no longer Christian. For a young person today, to believe does not mean to conform to social norms, but to be willing to accept being different in our post-Christian society.

Even if the fruits of WYD are not always visible, and even harder to measure in the short term, we can see the new impetus they have given to the local Church. It is not only youth ministry that has been reactivated, but the whole Church. It has grown in confidence in an environment that is often indifferent or hostile. In an age of secularisation, WYD demonstrates the role of public service undertaken by the Church in the numerous sectors of social life. It thus contributes to the building of a more tolerant society that is more open to youth, and so participates in the teaching of common values. In a context of fewer and of aging priests, WYD has given many pastors and faithful a new feeling of confidence. In this way, World Youth Day has been a breath of fresh air for the Church and has brought about more dynamic ministry "on the ground". It has clearly improved the visibility and image of the Church. Many find it more accessible and closer to people, particularly to youth.

World Youth Day is a special means of evangelising the world of youth because it has come as a response to match their expectations, notably through the "pedagogy" or teaching methods that are employed. Their purpose is to give as many young people as possible a spiritual and ecclesial experience, that is kerygmatic, sacramental and catechetical at the same time. WYD also has a vocational and missionary dimension. It helps young people to become aware of their Christian identity and of the demands implicit in the vocation of the baptised. It helps them discover that they are all called to holiness by living according to the Gospel and by proclaiming it through their daily lives.

III. Some ideas for reflection on youth ministry

We agree, I think, that in order to recognise the importance of World Youth Day and its impact on the life of the Church, one question remains: how can we "score a try" with WYD and ensure that this surge of enthusiasm is not just a "flash in the pan" with no long-term effects? When they return to the reality of daily life, what can help them to avoid becoming discouraged at the feelings of distance and rupture that seem to separate those intense moments they have experienced from normal daily routine? There is a temptation, a mistaken one, to contrast the "exceptional" aspect of WYD with the "ordinary" aspect of youth ministry that is more down-to-earth and practical. It is certainly not a question of reproducing WYD at a diocesan or national level, but of trying to integrate the key elements of WYD teaching methods (pedagogy) into local pastoral ministry. We know from experience that the most important aspects of World Youth Day are to be found more in the preparation and follow-up than in the event itself.

We shall try to draw forth the consequences of the above statement by selecting some priorities for "ordinary" pastoral ministry. These are not meant as "recipes" but as guidelines to be developed within the context of society today. First of all we must recognise that young people are faced with all kinds of different possibilities, also in the religious domain. Besides, we should not underestimate the great mobility of youth who tend to prefer instantaneity and to escape into the imaginary. These phenomena come together to form a "zapping culture", one that leads to fragmentation, dispersion and superficiality rather than rooting in the real and long-term structures and frameworks. The challenge for pastoral ministry is to help young people to find the inner wholeness of their being and to articulate faith and reason, the sensorial and the rational, the emotional and the spiritual.

I shall regroup these basic priorities of pastoral ministry into four complementary sections. They are not to be considered as an obligatory programme to be followed step by step by the young people, but more like a house with many entrances. Your mission as educators consists in helping young people to grow in a life firmly rooted in Christ, structured by a solid preparation in the faith, made vibrant with love for the Church, involved in the world and directed towards the mission.

1) A life firmly rooted in Christ

The priority of all youth ministry is to strengthen the youth in their relationship with Jesus Christ. WYD gives many young people the opportunity to experience an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that is characterised precisely by this personal encounter with Christ as a living person. This experience renews the baptised in their Christian lives and gives them new zeal for evangelisation. A relationship with Christ is formed day by day in personal prayer, habitual contact with the Word of God and a regular sacramental life. These are elements that are not so natural to a generation little used to taking on specific long-term commitments. For this reason it is important to introduce them to this and to be with them on the path of spiritual life. Young people today are actually asking to be shown how to pray. Even if they are generally sucked into the deafening whirlwind characteristic of their generation, young people thirst for silence and are prepared to let themselves be guided towards an interior life. This is absolutely necessary (as we have emphasised) for both their human and spiritual equilibrium. Education in the liturgical and sacramental life is equally important in order to enter in depth into a life of faith and the beauty of the Mystery of the Church.

"Exemplars" and personal witness are important educational elements to be integrated into youth ministry. As we can see from the example of Pope John Paul II, young people need to see coherence between words and actions. In this perspective, it is important to invite young people to meet witnesses of the faith engaged in the life of the Church and of the world. "Vocations ministry" is at the heart of youth ministry. As the Pope often emphasises, it is characteristic of youth to reflect on their future and to search for their vocation, understood as a call from God and one that is unique

for each human being. The presence of people of different "states in life" within groups of young people, helps their desire for holiness to grow and helps them to recognise which specific vocation (marriage, priesthood, consecrated life) is the one through which they can respond most radically to the Lord's call. In that way, "vocations ministry" will be appreciated and it will be fully integrated into your pastoral objectives as a whole without having to involve a great deal of resources.

2) A life structured by solid preparation in the faith

Young people are willing to be taught and educated in the faith, even if they say they are non-believers and are distant from the Church. This is one of the paradoxes of our age. The fact that they know little about the tenets of the faith leaves them open to receive "basic nourishment", the first step before progressing to more structured instruction. There has been a notable increase in the number of catechumens and "recommençants" [people who return to the Church] after WYDs, particularly in the country that has organised the event. The interest aroused by the catecheses that take place during WYD is also a good illustration of this trend. Why not extend this experience by proposing to your bishops that they invite young people on a regular basis to meet for a time of catechesis and dialogue? Furthermore, what kind of instruction should we favour?

Young people today need training - both structured and that can be built upon - that closely links the foundations of faith and Christian experience. In order to be attractive, this training should be accessible and diversified. It could be characterised as:

- "Integral training" or global instruction that takes the whole person into account on the human and spiritual levels, as well as the relationship between nature and grace.
- Biblical and anthropological instruction that introduces God's plan of salvation for humankind, and also helps young people to build their personalities and to exercise their freedom in a responsible manner. This is one of the priorities because young people today find it difficult to commit themselves and to take decisions that engage their whole life.
- Doctrinal instruction that is systematic and consistent, that emphasises our reasons for believing and offers the treasure of the Christian faith as it was handed down to us by Tradition.
- Ecclesial instruction that helps each baptised person to discover their Christian identity and to love the Church as a Mother takes care of her children and sees that they are educated in the faith.
- Ethical instruction that gives objective points of reference to guide their lives.

Taking into account the different kinds of situations they live in, it is essential to offer the youth itineraries adapted to their needs while including these different complementary aspects.

3) A life vibrant with love for the Church

We have seen that WYD is a very special opportunity for young people to discover the universal Church. How can you make this dimension of the Church more present in your "ordinary" pastoral ministry? One simple and instructive way is to get the young people to follow the rhythm of the universal Church by acquainting them with the Pope's initiatives and inviting them to pray regularly for his intentions and familiarising them with his writings. Your pastoral ministry can be enriched if it is inspired more by the guidelines given by the Holy Father, for example, by those given in the Message he addresses to the youth of the world every year. The study and meditation of these texts in small groups is actually an essential element in the pastoral plan of WYD, both in their

preparation and their follow-up. Another of the positive aspects of WYD is that it allows the Church to be seen in its diversity. At the level of each local Church, it is good to carry on from this experience and encourage them to get to know about other Church realities, and to stimulate new initiatives and ways of collaborating. These could be between parishes and chaplaincies, diocesan bodies and ecclesial movements or new communities. It is an excellent way to allow all of these to get to know each other better and to grow in mutual respect. For these young people eager to learn about the diverse ways of living the faith, different initiatives can be taken to foster exchanges with youth from other milieus and cultures, for example, twinning with youth from other regions or countries.

You would say, however, that one of the major difficulties in the WYD follow-up is how to encourage young people to be involved in their parishes when they return back to their dioceses, parishes where there are often few parishioners and these are mostly older. They do not find them attractive because they do not find there the experiences they have had at WYD together with hundreds of thousands of young people together with the Pope. Of course it is not possible to fabricate a reproduction of the experience of communion they have had in Manila, Denver, Paris, Rome or Toronto. However, you should use your pastoral zeal to help parishes, chaplaincies and groups in your town or region to become more open communities of fellowship. Life attracts life! One of the priorities to be developed is certainly the quality of welcome, attentive and personalised. This requires the presence of people available to give time freely to listen to youth and help them through difficult times. Then they will come and feel they can confide in someone. In society today where young people feel a great sense of loneliness which is often hidden by their gregarious tendencies to gather in gangs and groups of friends, their human and spiritual growth relies on having a reserve of trained accompanying adults within Christian communities.

4) A life involved in the world and directed towards the mission

Prayer and the spiritual life are important elements in every Christian life, but experience shows that many young people feel the need to take action and serve. To encourage them to be involved in humanitarian and social initiatives can be a good way to help them to become aware of the fact that Christians are required to be involved in the world and to take on responsibilities in society in the service of the common good and in the building of peace. By entering into the service of the poor, their hearts will be opened to compassion and charity, and they will understand God's desire to reveal his love to all humanity, and so their desire for the mission will grow.

Youth ministry must take this missionary perspective into account, one that is moved by a desire for the salvation of humankind. Local missionary initiatives are the best way to help young people understand that mission is the normal and essential vocation of all the baptised. The ways in which it is done is not the most important aspect. Direct evangelisation activities in the streets or university campus, for example, are good exercises, because all evangelisation involves an explicit proclamation. These initiatives do not preclude witness of life, because it is also necessary, in ordinary daily life, in studies, work and free time.

Young people may not feel at ease in a static Church, but they are happy to be part of a Church that is not afraid to go beyond the walls to pray and to witness to its faith publicly. This is why youth ministry also encourages pilgrimages, and this gives prominence to the shrines in your country or diocese that are sometimes unknown or empty. It also helps young people to rediscover the Christian roots of their history and culture.

To conclude, I will emphasise the fact that World Youth Day has contributed to making the Church more attentive to the questioning cries of the young and has thus fostered dialogue between the

generations. One of the key points about WYD is that they are carried out for young people and by young people. They have helped adults to understand that they have to trust youth and place them in situations of responsibility. This was deep insight on the part of Pope John Paul II who has put this in action throughout his pontificate. The Pope inspires confidence in young people because they feel loved and esteemed by him. We know well that the key to any mission with youth is to inspire their confidence. The Church must not shy away from its mission. It must transmit its rich experience to young people, but it must also know how to listen. The Holy Father says this in his Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*: "*The Church has so much to talk about with youth, and youth have so much to share with the Church*"(n. 46).