

INTERNATIONAL GATHERING OF WYD ORGANISERS
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Introduction to the Message of the Holy Father Benedict XVI
on the occasion of the 24th World Youth Day 2009

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Before outlining the main points of the Holy Father's 2009 message to the youth of the world, I would like to place this year's theme within the framework of the themes for the coming World Youth Days leading up to WYD in Madrid in August 2011.

1. The themes for the next three WYDs

These were announced by the Holy Father in his 2009 message:

24th WYD 2009 *"We have set our hope on the living God"* (1 Tm 4:10)

25th WYD 2010 *"Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"* (Mk 10:17)

26th WYD 2011 *"Rooted and built up in Jesus Christ, firm in the faith"* (cf Col 2:7)

2. The "dynamics" of this three year period

Each of the themes has its own logic, yet at the same time they are all linked to each other. The theme for 2009 speaks of hope. It is taken from a quotation from the first letter of Saint Paul to Timothy, also because 2008-2009 is the year of Saint Paul: *"We have set our hope on the living God"* (1 Tm 4:10).

It is evident that this is a theme much needed by young people in our present times. We shall speak of this later. It is also clear that hope is a central virtue of Christian life. The Pope said in the Message, "The question of hope is truly central to our lives as human beings and our mission as Christians, especially in these times".

This theme is also connected to the missionary call that resounded at the Sydney WYD where the Pope explained to the young people that today the Holy Spirit makes us all witnesses of hope in the world in which we live, and he urged them to take part in the building up of a new world where life is welcomed, love is generous and action is unselfish.

These are his words: "Dear young friends, the Lord is asking you to be prophets of this new age, messengers of his love, drawing people to the Father and building a future of hope for all humanity" (Homily, 20 July 2008).

The theme for 2010 derives from the question the rich young man puts to Jesus in Mark's gospel: "*Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*" (Mk 10:17, Mt 19:16, Lk 18:18).

In 2010 we shall celebrate the 25th anniversary of Pope John Paul's letter to youth in 1985 in which he presents a magnificent commentary on the meeting between Jesus and the rich young man.¹ The young man's question referred to action: "What must I do?". The WYD 2010 theme therefore refers to Christian engagement with the world. The purpose of this engagement is "to inherit eternal life". We can see how this theme carries on from the previous one, centred on hope in eternal life.

The theme for WYD 2011 in Madrid is taken from the letter of Saint Paul to the Colossians and it refers to the rooting of faith in Christ: "*Rooted and built up in Jesus Christ, firm in the faith*" (cf Col 2:7). The Pope constantly encourages young people to cultivate their Christian faith so that it may become mature and solid, a strong and secure base for their lives.

The Holy Father is offering young people a real "path of instruction" for these three years leading up to Madrid. As you can see, in a way they refer to the three theological virtues: *hope, charity and faith*. As the French poet Charles Péguy wrote, if the three virtues are like three sisters, the youngest one, hope, leads the other two by the hand. This is undoubtedly why our path is beginning with hope.

3. The "context" of the theme

I believe that the theme chosen for WYD 2009 - "*We have set our hope on the living God*" (1 Tm 4:10) - is very appropriate for our current times for various reasons.

The first is because of the current year of Saint Paul: the theme is taken directly from Saint Paul's writings, an important theme because the word "hope" appears in his letters many times.

This theme is also timely because of the current social-cultural situation. The present crisis is felt in various different ways: the financial crisis, the employment crisis, the economic crisis, the lack of food and water for many people, etc. However, there is also a moral crisis, the crisis of the family affected by a high number of divorces and the promotion of other models of life, the serious problem of birthrate, bio-ethics, etc.

If we think about it, we see that this is all linked to the virtue of hope. It is a lack of hope that prevents a couple from giving life and starting a family. It is a lack of hope that prevents governments and companies from making projects. Young people are among the first victims of this crisis of hope. If society does not offer them hope for a future with a family and a profession, how can they think a building anything? What is the purpose of studying? Why plan for a love that can last? This is even worse when we remember that the years of youth are a time of hope. It is one of the characteristics of that age.

The mission of the Church is therefore to restore to youth that which is vital for them: the ability to go forward, to be involved, to study in preparation for their future and the future of the world, and therefore to fully live the present.

¹

Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Dilecti Amici* to the youth of the world on the occasion of the International Year of Youth (31.03.1985), Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 1985.

Moreover, young Christians have the mission to be witnesses of hope to their peers. The community of believers should help them to become, through God's grace, witnesses of hope for the world. Throughout the ages, society has benefited from the contribution of youth.

We can point to the influence of young monks in Europe in the Middle Ages and the work of Saint Francis of Assisi. In more recent times we have the young Frédéric Ozanam (1813-1853) who founded the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul at the age of 20 (1933), or we think of the impact of Saint Teresa of the Child Jesus (1873-1897) and Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati (1901-1925), both of whom died at the age of 24.

So many young people contributed to the world because they were sustained by great hope. Hope is found in Christ, the living God, as Saint Paul asserted after having experienced it on the road to Damascus at around the age of twenty. He testified to it with passion until the time of his death.

4. A theme close to the heart of Pope Benedict XVI

As we know, the Pope's second encyclical was on hope, *Spe salvi*. In this encyclical, he shows how hope, so necessary for our world, is present in the Church and in all of Sacred Scripture. He illustrates this hope with the witness given by the young African Josephine Bakhita, who was born around 1869 in Darfur, Sudan.

She was a slave, badly treated, and then sold to an Italian consul, but Josephine discovered Jesus Christ, the good Master who loved her and made her a daughter of God the Father. To be loved no matter what happened - this was her hope. She was baptised at the age of about twenty-one. She then opted for the religious life as she had a great missionary desire to share her hope with the largest number of people possible.

In the encyclical *Spe salvi*, Benedict XVI also explains how the dominant culture in the past two centuries tried to establish hope outside the relationship with God. Hope was often placed exclusively on scientific and technical progress, on political systems, on individual freedom and on materialism. God was absent from so many currents of thought. We are aware of the results: the terrible wars and injustice of the 20th century and individualism and despair in both rich and poor countries.

In his message to young people, Benedict XVI takes up this significant observation: "Experience shows that personal qualities and material goods are not enough to guarantee the hope which the human spirit is constantly seeking. As I wrote in the Encyclical *Spe Salvi*, politics, science, technology, economics and all other material resources are not of themselves sufficient to provide the great hope to which we all aspire. This hope 'can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and who can bestow upon us what we, by ourselves, cannot attain' (no. 31). This is why one of the main consequences of ignoring God is the evident loss of direction that marks our societies, resulting in loneliness and violence, discontent and loss of confidence that can often lead to despair".

The Pope urges young people to search for the *great hope* and to become missionaries: "We know that it is in God alone that a human person finds true fulfilment. The main task for us all is that of a new evangelization aimed at helping younger generations to rediscover the true face of God, who is Love. To you young people, who are in search of a firm hope, I address the very words that Saint Paul wrote to the persecuted Christians in Rome at that time: 'May the God of hope fill you with all

joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit' (*Rom 15:13*)”.

5. In the school of Saint Paul

In this year of Saint Paul, Benedict XVI recommends Saint Paul to young people as an example of an apostle of hope. The key to his hope is in his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus. The Pope emphasises that for him hope was not just a feeling, an idea, a blessed optimism, but a gift that came from an encounter with the Saviour of the world:

“For Paul, hope is not simply an ideal or sentiment, but a living person: Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Profoundly imbued with this certainty, he could write to Timothy: "We have set our hope on the living God" (1 *Tim 4:10*). The "living God" is the Risen Christ present in our world. He is the true hope: the Christ who lives with us and in us and who calls us to share in his eternal life. If we are not alone, if he is with us, even more, if he is our present and our future, why be afraid?”

This is simple yet fundamental, and it has clear consequences for youth ministry. We cannot give young people reasons for hope without recommending an encounter with Christ. Everything else is secondary. Without the possibility of a strong and personal relationship with the Saviour, we are building on sand. Nothing will be left of our pastoral work with youth. On the other hand, if they have found the Messiah, they can receive from him the means to go ahead in life and fulfil their mission as Christians. It is not a case of giving them a glass of water by drawing on our personal reserve, but to lead them to the fountain. It is only in this way that they can return to drink and bring others with them.

6. The “means” of hope

How can we help young Christians to receive this hope through an encounter with Christ? The Holy Father recalls the means with which Christ habitually offers himself to us.

First of all prayer, the act of hope *par excellence*. Over twenty years ago (1986) during a spiritual retreat, Cardinal Ratzinger spoke of prayer as the “interpretation of hope” (Thomas Aquinas) and added “Prayer is the language of hope”². In particular, he recommended the Our Father as a school of hope. He said: “a man in despair no longer prays because he no longer has hope; a man who is secure in his own power and in himself no longer prays because he only trusts in himself. The one who prays hopes in goodness and power that extend beyond his own possibilities. Prayer is hope in action”.

Let us make our youth groups schools of prayer, followed by the Eucharist and the other sacraments, in particular Reconciliation, the sacrament of hope *par excellence*. Let us be generous in recommending the sacraments.

Our young people need to receive instruction in how to live out this hope with patience and perseverance. In this way they can be credible witnesses: “Make choices that demonstrate your faith. Show that you understand the risks of idolizing money, material goods, career and success, and do not allow yourselves to be attracted by these false illusions. Do not yield to the rationale of

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J. Ratzinger, *Guardare Cristo*, Esercizi di Fede, Speranza e Carità [Looking at Christ: Exercises in Faith, Hope and Charity], Jaca Book, Milan 1989, 54.

selfish interests. Cultivate love of neighbour and try to put yourselves and your human talents and professional abilities at the service of the common good and of truth, always prepared to ‘make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you’ (1 *Pet* 3:15)”.

The Pope reminds us that the saints, first witnesses of hope in the glory that awaits us, are powerful helpers. He then concludes with the lovely prayer of Saint Bernard that presents Our Lady as the star of the sea that guides lost ships to port.

7. A message close to young people

To conclude, I would like to say that we have heard that this message is very suited to young Catholics. It is simple to read, realistic in its analysis of the situation of young people today, and it is rich and deep in content - without being excessively long.

One young person said that “you can see that the Pope is a realist, and that he is close to young people and their lives”. Another said that “you would need to stop and meditate on each paragraph”. Yet another said that “the Pope speaks to youth like a father and he really helps them to enter into hope”.

For this reason I would like to encourage you to take this message as a powerful reflection on the Word of God for young people today. You yourselves should meditate on it and try to transmit it!