



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT
OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO ASSISI
ON THE EIGHTH CENTENARY
OF THE CONVERSION OF SAINT FRANCIS

MEETING WITH YOUTH

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Square in front of the Basilica of St Mary of the Angels
Sunday, 17 June 2007*

Dearest Young People,

Thank you for your very warm welcome; I feel in you the faith, I feel the joy of being Catholic Christians. Thank you for the affectionate words and for the important questions that your two representatives addressed to me. I hope to say something in the course of this meeting on these questions which are questions about life; therefore, I cannot give an exhaustive answer now, but I will try to say something.

But above all I greet you all, young people of this Diocese of Assisi-Nocera Umbra-Gualdo Tadino, with your Archbishop Domenico Sorrentino. I greet you, youth of the whole Diocese of Umbria, gathered here with your Pastors. Of course, I also greet you, young people from other regions of Italy accompanied by your Franciscan leaders. I address a cordial greeting to Cardinal Attilio Nicora, my Legate for the Papal Basilicas of Assisi, and to the Ministers General of the various Franciscan Orders.

Here, with Francis, the heart of a Mother, the "Virgin made Church", as he liked to invoke her, welcomes us (cf. *Salut BVM*, 1). Francis had a special affection for the little Church of the

Portiuncula, kept in this Basilica of St Mary of the Angels. It was among the churches that gave him shelter in the first years of his conversion and where he listened to and meditated on the Gospel of the mission (cf. 1 *Cel* I, 9, 22).

After the first steps at Rivotorto, it was here that he placed the "headquarters" of the Order, where the friars could gather almost as if in a maternal womb to restore themselves and to set out again, full of apostolic zeal.

Here all had access to a font of mercy in the experience of the "great pardon" which all of us always need. Lastly, here he lived his meeting with "sister death".

Dear young people, you know that what brought me to Assisi was the desire to relive the interior journey of Francis on the occasion of the eighth centenary of his conversion.

This moment of my Pilgrimage has a particular significance. I think of this moment as the climax of my day.

St Francis speaks to all, but I know that for you young people he has a special attraction. Your numerous presence here confirms it for me, as do the questions that you have asked me. His conversion came about when he was in the prime of life, of his experience, of his dreams. He had spent 25 years without coming to terms with the meaning of life. A few months before he died, he would recall that period as the time when he "was in sin" (cf. 2 *Testament* 1).

What was Francis' thought concerning sin? According to biographies, each one according to its own view, it is not easy to determine. A meaningful portrait of his way of living is found in the *Legend of the Three Companions (LTC)*, where one reads: "Francis was always happy and generous, dedicated to play and song, roaming through the town of Assisi day and night with friends like him, spend-thrifts, dissipating all that they could have or earn on lunches and other things" (3 *LTC* 1, 2).

Of how many of today's youth could something similar be said? Then today, there is also the possibility of going far from one's city to have fun. The initiatives for relaxation during the weekend attract many young people. One can even "surf" virtually, "navigating" on the internet and seeking every type of information or contact.

Unfortunately, there is no lack of - and rather, there are many, too many! - young people who seek mental scenes as fatuous as they are destructive in the artificial paradise of drugs. How can it be denied that there are many young people, and not so young people, who are tempted to emulate the life of Francis before his conversion?

In that way of living there was the desire for happiness that dwells in every human heart. But could

that life bring true joy? Francis certainly did not find it.

You yourselves, dear young people, can verify this beginning with your experience. The truth is that finite things can give only a faint idea of joy, but only the Infinite can fill the heart. Another great convert said so, St Augustine: "You made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you" (*Confessions* 1, 1).

Again the same biographical text tells us that Francis was rather vane. He liked to have sumptuous clothing made for him and sought originality (cf. 3 *LTS* 1, 2).

In vanity, in the quest for originality, there is something that in some way touches all of us. Today, "taking care of one's image" or of "seeking an image" is often spoken of. To be able to have a minimum of success, we need to win approval in the eyes of others with something unheard of, original.

To a certain extent this can express an innocent desire to be accepted. But often pride, excessive self-seeking, egoism and the desire to dominate creep in.

In reality, centering life upon oneself is a mortal trap: we can be ourselves only if we open ourselves in love, loving God and our brothers and sisters.

An aspect that impressed the contemporaries of Francis was also his ambition, his thirst for glory and adventure. It was this that led him to the battlefield, where he ended as a prisoner for a year in Perugia. The same thirst for glory, when freed, would take him to Apulia, on a new military expedition, but precisely in this circumstance, at Spoleto, the Lord made himself present in his heart and inspired him to retrace his steps and listen seriously to his Word.

It is interesting to notice how the Lord took Francis in his stride, that of wanting to affirm himself, in order to indicate to him the path of a holy ambition focused on the Infinite: "Who can be more useful to you, the master or the servant?" (*LTC* 2, 6), was the question that he heard resound in his heart. It was as if to say: why be content to be dependent on men when there is a God ready to welcome you into his house, into his royal service?

Dear young people, you reminded me about some problems concerning youth, of your difficulty to build a future, and above all how to discern the truth.

In Christ's passion narrative we find Pilate's question: "What is truth?" (Jn 18: 38). It is the question of a sceptic who asks: "But, you say you are the truth, but what is the truth?". And thus, with truth being unrecognizable, Pilate lets it be understood: we act according to what is most practical, what is most successful and not seeking the truth. He then condemns Jesus to death because he follows pragmatism, success, his own fortune.

Many today also say: "But what is the truth? We can find fragments, but how can we find the truth?". It is really hard to believe that this is the truth: Jesus Christ, the true Life, the compass of our life. And yet, if we begin, as it is very tempting to do, to live for the moment without truth, we really lose the criteria and we also lose the foundation of common peace which alone can be the truth.

And this truth is Christ. The truth of Christ has been proven in the lives of the saints in all ages. The saints are the great trails of light in history that attest: this is the life, this is the way, this is the truth.

Therefore, we have the courage to say "yes" to Jesus Christ: "Your truth is proven in the lives of many saints. We will follow you!".

Dear young people, coming here from the Basilica of the *Sacro Convento*, I thought that perhaps it would not be good to speak continuously for almost an hour. Therefore, I think now would be the moment for a pause, for a song. I know that you have many songs, perhaps I can hear one of your songs now.

Now then, we have heard repeated in the song that St Francis heard the voice. He heard in his heart the voice of Christ, and what happened? He came to understand that he had to place himself at the service of his brethren, above all those suffering most. This is the consequence of that first encounter with the voice of Christ.

This morning, passing by Rivortorto, I glanced at the place where, according to tradition, the lepers were gathered: the least, the marginalized, for whom Francis felt an irrepressible sense of disgust.

Touched by grace he opened his heart to them. And he did it not only from a pious gesture of charity, which would be too little, but by kissing them and serving them. He himself confesses that what at first had been bitter, became for him "sweetness of soul and body" (cf. *2 Test.* 3).

Grace, therefore, began to form Francis. He became ever more able to fix his gaze on the Face of Christ and to listen to his voice. It was at that point that the Crucifix of San Damiano spoke to him, calling him to a difficult mission: "Go, Francis, and repair my house which, as you can see, is all in ruins" (cf. *2 Cell*, 6, 10).

This morning, being at San Damiano, and then at the Basilica of St Clare where the original Crucifix that spoke to Francis is kept, I too fixed my eyes on those eyes of Christ. It is the image of the Crucified and Risen Christ, life of the Church, that speaks also in us if we are attentive, as 2,000 years ago he spoke to his Apostles and 800 years ago he spoke to Francis. The Church continually lives by this encounter.

Yes, dear young people: *may we let ourselves encounter Christ!* We entrust ourselves to his

Word. In him there is not only a fascinating human being.

Certainly, he is fully human and similar to us in everything except sin (cf. Heb 4: 15). But he is also much more: God is made man in him and therefore he is the only Saviour, as his very Name says: Jesus, or rather, "God saves".

One comes to Assisi to learn from St Francis the secret of recognizing Jesus Christ and experiencing him. This is what Francis felt about Jesus, according to what his first biographer narrates: "He always carried Jesus in his heart. Jesus on his lips, Jesus in his ears, Jesus in his eyes, Jesus in his hands, Jesus in all his other members.... Rather, finding himself travelling often and meditating on and singing of Jesus, he would forget that he was travelling and would invite all creatures to praise Jesus" (cf. 1 *Cel* II, 9, 115). Thus, we see that communion with Jesus also opens the heart and eyes to creation.

In a word, Francis was truly in love with Jesus. He met him in the Word of God, in the brethren, in nature, but above all in the Eucharistic Presence. Concerning this he wrote in his *Testament*: "In this world, I see nothing corporally of the same Most High Son of God except in his Most Holy Body and Most Holy Blood" (cf. 2 *Test.* 10).

Christmas at Greccio expresses the need to contemplate him in his tender humanity as a baby (cf. 1 *Cel* I, 30, 85-86).

The experience of La Verna, where he received the stigmata, shows the degree of intimacy he had reached in his relationship with the Crucified Christ. He could truly say with Paul: "For me to live is Christ" (Phil 1: 21).

If he rids himself of everything and chooses poverty, the reason for all of this is Christ, and only Christ. Jesus is his all: he is enough!

Exactly because he is *of Christ*, Francis is also a man *of the Church*. From the Crucifix of San Damiano he heard the direction to repair the house of Christ, which is precisely the Church.

There is an intimate and indissoluble relationship between Christ and the Church. To be called to repair it certainly implies, in the mission of Francis, something that is his own and original. At the same time, this duty, after all, was none other than the responsibility that Christ attributes to every baptized person. To every one of us he also says: "Go and repair my house".

We are all called to repair in every generation the house of Christ, the Church, anew. And only by doing this does the Church live and become beautiful. And as we know, there are many ways to repair, to edify, to build the house of God, the Church. One also edifies through the different vocations, from the lay and family vocation, to the life of special consecration, to the priestly

vocation.

At this point I wish to dwell in particular on this vocation. Francis, who was a deacon, not a priest (cf. 1 *Ce/I*, 30, 86), nourished a great veneration for priests. Although knowing that there is also much poverty and fragility in God's ministers, he saw them as ministers of the Body of Christ, and that was enough to make a sense of love, reverence and obedience well up within him (cf. 2 *Test.* 6-10).

His love for priests is an invitation to rediscover the beauty of this vocation. It is vital for the People of God.

Dear young people, surround your priests with love and gratitude. If the Lord should call some of you to this great ministry, or even to some form of consecrated life, do not hesitate to say your "yes". Yes is not easy, but it is beautiful to be ministers of the Lord, *it is beautiful to spend your life for him!*

The young Francis felt a truly filial affection for his Bishop, and it was in his hands that, stripping himself of everything, he made his profession of a life already totally consecrated to the Lord (cf. 1 *Ce/I*, 6, 15). He felt in a special way the mission of the Vicar of Christ, to whom he submitted his Rule and entrusted his Order.

If the Popes have shown throughout history such affection for Assisi, this in a certain sense is in exchange for the affection that Francis had for the Pope. I am pleased, dear young people, to be here, in the wake of my Predecessors and in particular of my friend, the beloved Pope John Paul II.

As with concentric circles, the love of Francis for Jesus extends not only to the Church but to all things seen in Christ and for Christ. Here the *Canticle of the Creatures* is born in which the eye rests on the splendour of creation: from brother sun to sister moon, from sister water to brother fire.

His interior gaze became so pure and penetrating as to perceive the beauty of creation in the beauty of creatures. The *Canticle of Brother Sun*, before being a great work of poetry and an implicit invitation to respect creation, is a prayer, praise addressed to the Lord, Creator of all.

Under the banner of prayer one can see Francis' commitment to *peace*. This aspect of his life is highly contemporary in a world that greatly needs peace and is not able to find the way to it. Francis is a man of peace and a peacemaker. He witnessed it in his meekness, yet without ever remaining silent about his faith, as his meeting with the Sultan demonstrates (cf. 1 *Ce/I*, 20, 57).

Since interreligious dialogue, especially after the Second Vatican Council, has today become the

common and irrenounceable heritage of Christian sensitivity, Francis can help us to dialogue authentically without falling into an attitude of indifference in regard to the truth or in the attenuation of our Christian proclamation.

His being a man of peace, tolerance and dialogue, is ever born from his experience of God-Love. His greeting of peace, is, not by chance, a prayer: "May the Lord give you peace" (2 *Test.* 23).

Dear young people, your vast presence here says how the figure of Francis speaks to your heart. I willingly consign his message to you, but above all, his life and his witness. It is time that you, young people, like Francis, take seriously and know how to enter into a personal relationship with Jesus. It is time to look at the history of this third millennium just begun as a history that needs the Gospel leaven ever more.

Once again, I make my own the invitation that my beloved Predecessor, John Paul II, always liked to address especially to youth: "Open the doors to Christ". Open them like Francis did, without fear, without calculation, without measure. Be, dear young people, my joy, as you were for John Paul II.

From this Basilica dedicated to St Mary of the Angels, I invite you to come to the House of Loreto at the beginning of September for the *Agorà* of Italian youth.

My Blessing to all of you. Thank you for everything, for coming, for your prayers.

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