



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO REPRESENTATIVES OF THE ITALIAN MILITARY

1 March 1979

*Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Young Men,*

I am deeply happy to receive you and to express to you my sincere gratitude for the kind thought and the deep faith that have brought you here.

I address my cordial greeting to the Authorities, and in the first place to the Minister for Defence, the Heads of the General Staff, the Officers and Representatives of all branches of the Army, the Personnel of the Medical Corps, members of the various services, the ladies of the Aid Association, Sisters of the military hospitals and Red Cross nurses; and I intend to extend my thought also to all the persons dear to you.

In particular, I greet you young men who are doing your military service, and I am happy to stress that what I see in you above all is youth, always generous and bold in its aspirations, in its deep sentiments, in its ideals, in its demands before the great choices of life. Then, I see in you Italy, your native land, this inspiring and privileged nation, loved and visited by all peoples of the world, and to which other nations look with admiration because of Peter's See and because of the incalculable treasures of art, literature, and natural beauties which have induced great poets and thinkers of the whole world to describe it and sing of it as the "country" of the heart. I also see in you, in the uniform you wear, the testimony of a solemn commitment for the defence of the fundamental values of freedom, order, justice, and peace.

Reflecting now for a moment on your youthful age and your present task, and including also all your Italian friends whom you represent here, I wish to express some thoughts which occur spontaneously to me,

1. Yours is the age of the supreme question: what is the meaning of life? And consequently, what is the meaning of man's history?

This is certainly the most dramatic and also the most noble question which really stamps man in his nature as a person, intelligent and volitive. Man, in fact, cannot confine himself within the limit of time, the circle of matter, the knot of an immanent and self-sufficient existence. He can try to do so, he can also affirm in words and acts that his homeland is merely time and his dwelling merely the body. But actually the supreme question agitates him, goads him, and torments him. It is a question that cannot be eliminated.

Unfortunately, we know how a great part of modern, atheistic, agnostic, secularized thought insists on affirming and teaching that the supreme question is an illness of man, a put-up affair of a psychological and sentimental kind, from which it is necessary to be cured, facing courageously up to the absurd, death and nothingness.

It is a subtly dangerous philosophy, because, above all, a young person, still immature in thought, shaken by the painful events of past and present history, by the instability and uncertainty of the future, sometimes betrayed in his deepest affections, dispossessed, misunderstood, unemployed, may feel driven by this to seek escape in drugs, in violence or in despair.

2. Yours is the age of responsible and deliberate meeting with Christ.

Beloved youths, Jesus Christ alone is the adequate and ultimate answer to the supreme question about the meaning of life and history.

While respecting those who have other ideas, and well aware that faith in Christ has its times and its seasons and demands a personal development, bound up with God's "grace", I tell you with confident frankness that, having passed the ingenuous age of childhood and the sentimental period of adolescence, and having arrived at youth, that is, your exuberant and critical age, the most beautiful and stirring adventure that can happen to you is the personal meeting with Jesus, who is the only one who gives real meaning to our life.

It is not enough to look; it is necessary to look in order to find certainty. And certainty is Jesus who states: "I am the way, and the truth and the life!..." (Jn 14:6); "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness..." (Jn 8:12); "For this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth!..." (Jn 18:37).

Only Jesus has convincing and consoling words; only he has words of life, in fact of eternal life: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (Jn 5:16-17).

There is no solution for scepticism and despair except in faith in Christ. Only Jesus reveals the meaning of our existence in the boundless mystery of the universe, in the dark and unforeseeable turmoil of history! The great and well-known French philosopher and mathematician, Blaise Pascal, when he finally arrived at the definitive and joyful meeting with Christ, wrote with unequalled lucidity in his *Pensées*: "Not only do we know God only through Jesus Christ, but we, know ourselves only through Jesus Christ. We do not know life and death, unless through Jesus Christ. Outside Jesus Christ we do not know what is our life or our death, God and ourselves. For this reason, except for the Scripture, the object of which is Jesus Christ alone, we know nothing and see nothing but darkness and confusion in the nature of God and in our nature" (*Pensées*, n. 548). And the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council emphasized that "it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22).

3. Finally, and it is the practical conclusion, yours is the age of the most important decision. Whatever path you will choose in life, the most important decision is to live everywhere, always, and with everyone, the Christian ideal of love for God and one's neighbour.

Do not move away from Christ! Decide to be for him! Mankind needs, above all, good Samaritans because it needs Christ!

I am happy to recall an exhortation that Paul VI, my revered predecessor, addressed two years ago to twelve thousand young people in this hall: "Do not let yourselves be deceived by those who would like to bring into your heart ideals that are different from, and even in conflict with, those of your faith. Only in Christ is there the solution to all your problems. It is he who frees man from the chains of sin and of all slavery. He is the light that shines forth in the darkness; He is "the truth which raises us so very high" (Dante, *Par.* 22:43); it is he who gives to life the reasons for which it is worth living, loving, working, and suffering; he is our support and our solace." (*L'Osservatore Romano*, 24 April 1977)

To succeed in this decision, so sublime and so necessary, open your hearts and your consciences to the priest who is Christ's minister; now to your Chaplains and afterwards to the priests in charge of your spiritual care. You will find in them help and support for your Christian life.

Pass this period of service with a sense of friendship, brotherhood, and with a commitment of love; keep alive in your hearts nostalgia for your dear ones who are following you and waiting for you, as also respect for your Superiors, in the conviction that the greatness and honour of one's country depend on the honesty and seriousness of every citizen.

With these wishes, while I invoke continual assistance and the abundance of heavenly favours from God and from the Blessed Virgin for you and your families, I willingly bless you all.

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