

Card. Stanisław Rylko
President
Pontifical Council for the Laity
Vatican City

10th INTERNATIONAL YOUTH FORUM

"Learning to Love"

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Introduction

1. On behalf of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, I would like to welcome all of you, dear young people, to Rocca di Papa in the province of Rome for this 10th International Youth Forum. You have been sent here by your bishops' conferences or your international movement, association or new community (33), and you represent 90 countries and all the continents. I thank you for accepting our invitation and undertaking a journey that was long and arduous for some of you. You came here to contribute personally to this Forum, because here you are the main players. You are a small sample of the great "planet of the young", and you are here to tell us of the experiences and hopes of your peers. We depend very much on each one's contribution. Do not hesitate to contribute your ideas wherever possible, here in the assembly and in the workgroups. I would like to extend a special welcome to our speakers, moderators and panel members and my heartfelt gratitude for your willingness to place at the service of the youth at this Forum your expertise, life experience and your wisdom. Finally, I extend a fraternal greeting to the bishops, priests and religious who are personally engaged in youth ministry and who will accompany the young people here for the next few days. We can look forward to some special days in which we shall have a deep experience of the universal Church that lives in the most varied places on earth, and of its communion in a plurality of races, cultures, languages and religious traditions that are part of its extraordinary richness. It will be an experience for us all of a youthful Church that journeys with young people and that listens to them and teaches them with motherly love.

Furthermore, as you know, the International Youth Forum always takes place in conjunction with the annual celebration of World Youth Day. The occasion this year is particularly significant because it is the 25th anniversary of World Youth Day which was instituted by the Servant of God John Paul II in 1985. These global meetings of young people with the Successor of Peter are among his great prophetic intuitions, and they have generated wonderful fruits in the lives of youth everywhere. On Thursday we shall join the youth of the diocese of Rome in the solemn commemoration of this anniversary. It will take place in Saint Peter's Square in the presence of Pope Benedict XVI. On Palm Sunday, we shall all take part in the WYD celebration that will be presided by the Pope. So, now you see the context in which our Forum is happening.

2. The theme that we have chosen for the 10th International Youth Forum is about love: "Learning to love". To love and to know that we are loved is a question of vital importance for every human person – man or woman –, regardless of age, state in life or social condition. For young people, the word "love" touches a sensitive cord and awakens

intense nostalgia. Yet, what is love? What does it mean to love? It is not easy to speak about this subject nowadays in a world that seems to reject love. Why is this? Postmodern human beings no longer seem to know about the basic values of human existence, and they have emptied the very concept of love of its real meaning. Yet the word “love” is surely one of the most used, abused and distorted. We still feel the devastating effects of the “sexual revolution” of the nineteen-sixties and seventies that have taken human sexuality almost completely away from the ethical sphere and have reduced love to sex and sex to a mere object of pleasure and a throw-away consumer item. The massive proliferation of contraceptives has totally cut the link between sexuality, affectivity and procreation, thus fuelling a hostile outlook to life. It denies that conjugal love has an essential component: receptiveness to life. Consequently – we are told by an expert in this field – there is now a frightening level of affective immaturity, the trivialisation of sex and the dangerous regression of sex to the childhood and pre-adolescent stages.¹ There was also great disappointment regarding the promise of freedom (free love!), that had been loudly trumpeted by advocates of the “sexual revolution”. The same author wrote: “Instead of the freedom that they had put forward, there was a Pandora’s box of moral chaos from which the most derisive caricature of freedom possible burst onto the scene”.² What was seen as a revolution in the Sixties has become normality in the postmodern culture that dominates the scene today. In fact, from the anthropological point of view, some of today’s cultural paradigms are even more radical than those of the past. There are those who speak of a real “cultural revolution”. By means of the “deconstruction” of the fundamental principles that derive from Judaeo-Christian tradition, they aim to create, not only a “new world order”, but also a “new human being”. An example is the gender ideology which attacks the reality of human sexuality by considering it to be more a product of sociocultural conditioning than the result of the biological make-up of the person. When sexual differences are relativised in this way, identity becomes something that you arbitrarily choose as you please. This has disastrous effects on the institution of marriage and on the family. Statistics present us with a terrible picture: there is a constant increase in the number of divorces, *de facto* unions, and homosexual couples who want to marry and have the same rights regarding the adoption of children. Supported and amplified by the mass media, these trends are presented as signs of humanity’s progress and as epoch-making victories in achieving rights. Those who stand in their way are labelled as dangerously backward-looking. Unfortunately, this underlying cultural process does not spare Christians as it conditions their ideas and choices. We ourselves often lack the courage nowadays to go against the trend with regard to the dominant culture, and to really put our trust in love and life as the gospel teaches us. There is also a false *realpolitik* gaining ground among Christians that says that, “Yes, love is beautiful, but life is a different thing and it is governed by different laws that have very little to do with love”. Is this really the way it is? Can it be true that love is just a utopia? Is it a fact that marriage and family – that are founded on love – are now outmoded and have no future?

3. In order to approach the topic of love correctly, we must start out with a basic question:

¹ Cf. F. GIARDINI, *La rivoluzione sessuale*, Ed. Paoline 1974, p. 238.

² *Ibid.*, p. 227.

Who is the human person in their dual unity? John Paul II answers by saying: God is love (*1 Jn 4: 8*) and in Himself He lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in His own image and continually keeping it in being, God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion (cf *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 12). Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being”.³ With these words, the Venerable Servant of God echoed the teaching of the Second Vatican Council which declared that “if human beings are the only creatures on earth that God has wanted for their own sake, they can fully discover their true selves only in sincere self-giving”⁴. We must not reduce discussion of love to moralising or to superficial sentiments because love is a constituent element of the human person, a central concept in Christian anthropology. God created us to love! In this regard, Pope John Paul II wrote these memorable words in *Redemptor Hominis*: Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it. This [...] is why Christ the Redeemer ‘fully reveals man to himself’”.⁵ Pope Benedict XVI emphasises that “Charity in truth, to which Jesus Christ bore witness by his earthly life and especially by his death and resurrection, is the principal driving force behind the authentic development of every person and of all humanity”.⁶ Someone rephrased Descartes’s formula “*Cogito ergo sum*” as “I love, therefore I am”, or better still “God loved me from the beginning, therefore I am”.⁷

The aspects that love assumes in our lives – we could call them incarnations of love – are many: there is the love of married couples, the love of parents for their children and of children for their parents, the love between brothers and sisters, love for friends, country, neighbour, love for enemies as asked of us by the gospel... The love on which we want to focus in this Forum is the love on which marriage and family are founded, the love between a man and a woman.

In order to describe the love between a man and a woman, Pope Benedict applies two Greek terms: *eros* (which means love that is passionate, possessive, sensual and carnal) and *agape* (oblational love that becomes gift of self towards another, care for another, seeking what is best for the beloved). *Eros*, the Pope tells us, requires discipline, purification and growth in maturity towards *agape*. This does not mean that we reject *eros*, but that we want to restore it to its true greatness. Benedict XVI sees that this path of purification contains a kind of “ecstasy” or permanent “exodus” of individuals who are closed in on themselves towards their liberation through self-giving, towards finding themselves, and towards the discovery of God.⁸ Love of this kind naturally tends towards permanence: “both in the sense of exclusivity (this particular person alone) and in the

³ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, no. 11.

⁴ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24.

⁵ JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptor Hominis*, no. 10.

⁶ BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 1.

⁷ Cf. C. ANDERSON, *A Civilization of Love*, New York 2008.

⁸ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 6.

sense of being ‘for ever’”.⁹ The Pope concluded by saying that *eros* and *agape* in fact are never completely separated from each other, and they must continuously tend towards a harmonious unity. Human persons, as psychophysical beings, cannot only experience the moment of love that is *agape*. They need *eros*, because “they cannot only give, but must also receive. Anyone who wishes to give love must also receive love as a gift”.¹⁰

The foundation of the many kinds of love that we experience during our lifetime, as a gift given and received, is the love of God, the ultimate source of true love: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (*Deut* 6: 5). Between God’s commandment to love “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” and the commandment to love your neighbour “as yourself” (*Lev* 19: 18), there is a deep intrinsic connection. There is no conflict or rivalry between them. C.S. Lewis explains this in an interesting way in his lovely book *The Four Loves*. He wrote: “We were made for God. Only by being in some respect like Him, only by being a manifestation of His beauty, loving kindness, wisdom or goodness, has any earthly Beloved excited our love. It is not that we have loved them too much, but that we did not quite understand what we were loving. It is not that we shall be asked to turn from them, so dearly familiar, to a Stranger. When we see the face of God we shall know that we have always known it. He has been a party to, has made, sustained and moved moment by moment within, all our earthly experiences of innocent love. All that was true love in them was, even on earth, far more His than ours, and ours only because His”.¹¹ As the source of all true love, God-Love is the only guarantor of our love for our neighbour, protecting it from every danger and abuse. The commandment to love your neighbour “as yourself” demonstrates a very important *personalistic norm* of love, one which is the secure compass to which we should make constant reference. This principle declares, on the one hand, that a person should never be used as an object nor treated as a means to an end, and on the other hand, that each person is of such great worth that only love can dictate the appropriate and entirely correct attitude to have in their regard.¹² The commandment to love, therefore, seems to be the fundamental norm according to which we shape our behaviour and way of being in the world.

4. The question of love – our need to be loved and our desire to love – can be seen more keenly than ever among young people. Youth is a very important stage of existence because it is the time in which existential choices are made that are decisive for a person’s life, true vocational choices for marriage and family, and also for the priesthood and consecrated life. One of the greatest challenges for young people – as they are often surrounded by all kinds of propositions and impositions – is to discover true love on which it is worthwhile staking their lives, and also to cultivate their own ability to love. Pope John Paul II said in this regard when speaking to young people: “In you is decided the form that love will take throughout your life, be it in marriage, family and society, or as priests, religious and missionaries. Each life is decided and evaluated by means of the

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.* no. 7.

¹¹ C.S. LEWIS, *The Four Loves*, New York 1960, p.190.

¹² Cf. K. WOJTYŁA, *Love and Responsibility*, San Francisco 1993, p. 41.

kind of love it holds within. Tell me what your love is and I shall say who you are”.¹³ It is in love that our deepest identity is revealed: who we are today and who we shall be tomorrow. It is not by chance, therefore, that John Paul II was particularly concerned about preparing young people to be able to advance in life with “a mature inner programme of love”.¹⁴ He declared: “It is necessary to prepare young people for marriage, it is necessary to teach them love. Love is not something that is learned, and yet there is nothing else as important to learn!”.¹⁵ So, this is the heart of the subject matter of our Forum: “Learning to Love”.

Learning... Here we touch on a crucial problem found in today’s society: the emergency in education, a subject to which Pope Benedict XVI dedicates a great deal of attention. This emergency has arisen mostly because of the inability of a generation of adults to transmit to the younger generations the basic values and rules of human existence and hence also of love. Nowadays there is a worrying scarcity of places in which we can find real education, and also a lack of stable points of reference and of positive and inspiring role-models. Even families are no longer able to address this situation as they are being decimated by the plague of divorce. Postmodern culture, dominated by the “dictatorship of relativism”, refuses to believe that truth exists. Yet, without truth everything becomes fluid and there cannot be true education. It does not only stop there. Extreme individualism has become more widespread, excessively inflating the self which has become the measure of all things. Psychologists are warning us about a culture that mass produces “narcissists” who are pathologically turned in on themselves, hermetically sealed, incapable of relating to others, especially those of the opposite sex, emotionally immature and unable to love.¹⁶ When you are in a culture like this and you decide to learn to love, you need to have courage to go against the prevailing trends and to have the tenacity that is always needed when taking up a challenge. Let us thank the Lord, then, for all these young people who are still capable of choosing true love as their life programme and who are proud of it.

The young bishop Karol Wojtyła of Cracow wrote, in his book *Love and Responsibility*, some beautiful passages on this theme that start out with several important questions: “What does ‘the education of love’ mean? Can love be improved by education? Is not love something complete from the start, something given ready made to a human being or to two human beings, what might perhaps be called an adventure of the heart?”. He replied: “Love is never something ready made, something merely ‘given’ to man and woman; it is always at the same time a ‘task’ which they are set. Love should be seen as something which in a sense never ‘is’ but is always only ‘becoming’, and what it becomes depends upon the contribution of both persons and the depth of their commitment”. Personal engagement in the education of love is indispensable, and even that is not enough. He continued: “But the operation of Grace is implicit in these efforts, for they are the contribution of the invisible Creator who is Himself love, and has the power to fashion any love, including that which in its natural development is based on the values

¹³ JOHN PAUL II, To youth gathered for the appeal in Jasna Gora, 18 June 1983 [our translation].

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, London 1994, p. 122.

¹⁶ Cf. T. ANATRELLA, *Le règne de Narcisse. Les enjeux du déni de la différence sexuelle*, Paris 2005.

of sex and the body – provided that human beings are willing to be His conscious co-creators. There is no need to be dismayed if love sometimes follows tortuous ways. Grace has the power to make straight the paths of human love”.¹⁷ Benedict XVI took up the subject of education in love and emphasised the importance of freedom: “A true education must awaken the courage to make definitive decisions, which today are considered a mortifying bind to our freedom. In reality, they are indispensable for growth and in order to achieve something great in life, in particular, to cause love to mature in all its beauty: therefore, to give consistency and meaning to freedom itself”.¹⁸ He went on to say: “From this solicitude for the human person and their education comes our ‘no’ to weak and deviant forms of love and to the counterfeiting of freedom [...]. In truth, these ‘nos’ are rather ‘yesses’ to authentic love, to the reality of the human person as created by God”.¹⁹ To learn to love is a demanding journey that requires a capability for sacrifice and self-denial, the secret scenario of our love for others. It is particularly important nowadays to rediscover the value and beauty of chastity. It is often ridiculed and disdained as a senseless remnant of narrow-minded times long past. It is quite the contrary. Chastity is an expression of decidedly positive behaviour towards human sexuality. It recognises and appreciates its value, and it tends to live it out in an ordered way, harmoniously inserted in the integral vocation of the human person.²⁰

In the very nature of love there is written the law of growth. Our way of loving must grow. After passing the childhood and adolescent stages, our love must become mature. It is a demanding journey that we have to take up each day of our entire lives. Yet it is worthwhile undertaking this journey because it alone gives sense and meaning to our existence. Yes, true love has a very high price. It is like a treasure buried in the ground and the precious pearl in Jesus’ parable: in order to possess them we must be ready to give something...

5. We have come to this 10th International Youth Forum in order to love in the school of Jesus Christ. He is a good teacher, and demanding, and he tells us: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (*Jn* 15: 12). “As I have loved you” because “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (*Jn* 15: 13). Jesus Christ on the Cross loved us in exactly this way “to the end” (*Jn* 13: 1). This is what is so new and that is the horizon of love with which every Christian, Christ’s disciples, must measure up their own lives. The logic that guides a Christian’s life is the logic of gift. Love is their style of life, because in meeting Christ they “have known and believe the love that God has for us” (*1 Jn* 4: 16). Benedict XVI says: “love is the sign of Christians. It sums up their entire life: what they believe and what they do”.²¹ For Christians, therefore, love is a question of to be or not to be...

For these few days, let us allow ourselves to be guided by the words of Saint Paul’s beautiful hymn to love: “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and

¹⁷ K. WOJTYŁA, *Love and Responsibility*, op. cit., p.139.

¹⁸ BENEDICT XVI, To the participants at the Fourth National Ecclesial Convention in Italy, 19 October 2006.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ K. WOJTYŁA, *Love and Responsibility*, op. cit., p.140.

²¹ BENEDICT XVI, *Angelus*, 31 January 2010.

understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. [...] Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends” (*1 Cor* 13: 1-8).

This splendid identikit of love tells us about the demanding path that we are embarking on over these few days, but also about its great beauty, a beauty that cannot but win the hearts of young people. Christ is showing you the way by means of his Church because he trusts each one of you. The venerable Servant of God John Paul II, the great friend of young people, said: “Love is fair, it is beautiful. After all, young people are always searching for the beauty in love. They want their love to be beautiful. If they give in to weakness, [...] in the depths of their hearts they still desire a beautiful and pure love. This is as true of boys as it is of girls. Ultimately, they know that only God can give them this love. As a result, they are willing to follow Christ, without caring about the sacrifices this may entail”.²²

This Forum, then, has some difficult goals ahead, but there is the great desire to communicate hope and joy to all young people like you. The love that Christ teaches us is beautiful and it is possible. It is worth staking our lives on it. Wherever we live, it is worthwhile building a “civilisation of love”. We ask the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of Love – to be with us at this time, and to be our guide and inspiration. We entrust the activities of this Forum to Our Lady, Mother of Beautiful Love.

God bless the work!

²² JOHN PAUL II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, op. cit, p. 122.