

**MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER
BENEDICT XVI
TO THE YOUTH OF THE WORLD
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 21st WORLD YOUTH DAY
(9 APRIL 2006)**

*"Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path" (Ps 119 [118]:105)*

My dear young friends!

It is with great joy that I greet you as you prepare for the 21st World Youth Day, and I relive the memory of those enriching experiences we had in August last year in Germany. World Youth Day this year will be celebrated in the local Churches, and it will be a good opportunity to rekindle the flame of enthusiasm that was awakened in Cologne and which many of you have brought to your families, parishes, associations and movements. At the same time, it will be a wonderful chance to invite many of your friends to join the young generation's spiritual pilgrimage towards Christ.

The theme that I suggest to you is a verse from Psalm 119 [118]: "*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path*" (v. 105). Our dearly loved John Paul II commented on that verse of the psalm as follows: "The one who prays pours out his thanks for the Law of God that he adopts as a lamp for his steps in the often dark path of Life" (General Audience, Wednesday 14 November 2001). God reveals himself in history. He speaks to humankind, and the word he speaks has creative power. The Hebrew concept "*dabar*", usually translated as "word", really conveys both the meaning of *word* and *act*. God says what he does and does what he says. The Old Testament announces to the Children of Israel the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of a "new" covenant; in the Word made flesh He fulfils his promise. This is clearly specified in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "Christ, the Son of God made man, is the Father's one, perfect and unsurpassable Word. In him he has said everything; there will be no other word than this one" (n. 65). The Holy Spirit who has led the chosen people by inspiring the authors of the Sacred Scriptures, opens the hearts of believers to understand their meaning. This same Spirit is actively present in the Eucharistic celebration when the priest, "*in persona Christi*", says the words of consecration, changing the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, for the spiritual nourishment of the faithful. In order to progress on our earthly pilgrimage towards the heavenly Kingdom, we all need to be nourished by the word and the bread of eternal Life, and these are inseparable from one another!

The Apostles received the word of salvation and passed it on to their successors as a precious gem kept safely in the jewel box of the Church: without the Church, this pearl runs the risk of being lost or destroyed. My dear young friends, love the word of God and love the Church, and this will give you access to a treasure of very great value and will teach you how to appreciate its richness. Love and follow the Church, for it has received from its Founder the mission of showing people the way to true happiness. It is not easy to recognise and find authentic happiness in this world in which we live, where people are often held captive by the current ways of thinking. They may think they are "free", but they are being led astray and become lost amid the errors or illusions of aberrant ideologies. "Freedom itself needs to be set free" (cf the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, 86), and the darkness in which humankind is groping needs to be illuminated. Jesus taught us how this can be done: "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (*Jn* 8:31-32). The incarnate Word, Word of Truth, makes us free and directs our freedom towards the good. My dear young friends, meditate often on the word of God,

and allow the Holy Spirit to be your teacher. You will then discover that God's way of thinking is not the same as that of humankind's. You will find yourselves led to contemplate the real God and to read the events of history through his eyes. You will savour in fullness the joy that is born of truth. On life's journey, which is neither easy nor free of deceptions, you will meet difficulties and suffering and at times you will be tempted to exclaim with the psalmist: "I am severely afflicted" (*Ps* 119 [118]. v. 107). Do not forget to add as the psalmist did: "give me life, O Lord, according to your word... I hold my life in my hand continually, but I do not forget your law" (*ibid.* vv. 107; 109). The loving presence of God, through his word, is the lamp that dispels the darkness of fear and lights up the path even when times are most difficult.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews wrote: "Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (4:12). It is necessary to take seriously the injunction to consider the word of God to be an indispensable "weapon" in the spiritual struggle. This will be effective and show results if we learn to *listen* to it and then to *obey* it. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains: "To obey (from the Latin *ob-audire*, to 'hear or listen to') in faith is to submit freely to the word that has been heard, because its truth is guaranteed by God, who is Truth itself" (n. 144). While Abraham exemplifies this way of listening which is obedience, Solomon in his turn shows himself to be a passionate explorer of the wisdom contained in the Word. When God said to him: "Ask what I should give you", the wise king replied: "Give your servant therefore an understanding heart" (1 *Kings* 3:5,9). The secret of acquiring "*an understanding heart*" is to train your heart to *listen*. This is obtained by persistently meditating on the word of God and by remaining firmly rooted in it through the commitment to persevere in getting to know it better.

My dear young friends, I urge you to become familiar with the Bible, and to have it at hand so that it can be your compass pointing out the road to follow. By reading it, you will learn to know Christ. Note what Saint Jerome said in this regard: "Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ" (*PL* 24,17; cf *Dei Verbum*, 25). A time-honoured way to study and savour the word of God is *lectio divina* which constitutes a real and veritable *spiritual journey* marked out in stages. After the *lectio*, which consists of reading and rereading a passage from Sacred Scripture and taking in the main elements, we proceed to *meditatio*. This is a moment of interior reflection in which the soul turns to God and tries to understand what his word is saying to us today. Then comes *oratio* in which we linger to talk with God directly. Finally we come to *contemplatio*. This helps us to keep our hearts attentive to the presence of Christ whose word is "a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (2 *Pet* 1:19). Reading, study and meditation of the Word should then flow into a life of consistent fidelity to Christ and his teachings.

Saint James tells us: "Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act - they will be blessed in their doing" (1:22-25). Those who listen to the word of God and refer to it always, are constructing their existence on solid foundations. "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them", Jesus said, "will be like a wise man who built his house on rock" (Mt 7:24). It will not collapse when bad weather comes.

To build your life on Christ, to accept the word with joy and put its teachings into practice: this, young people of the third millennium, should be your programme! There is an urgent need for the emergence of a new generation of apostles anchored firmly in the word of Christ, capable of responding to the challenges of our times and prepared to spread the Gospel far and wide. It is this

that the Lord asks of you, it is to this that the Church invites you, and it is this that the world - even though it may not be aware of it - expects of you! If Jesus calls you, do not be afraid to respond to him with generosity, especially when he asks you to follow him in the consecrated life or in the priesthood. Do not be afraid; trust in him and you will not be disappointed.

Dear friends, at the 21st World Youth Day that we will celebrate on 9 April next, Palm Sunday, we will set out, in our hearts, on a pilgrimage towards the world encounter with young people that will take place in Sydney in July 2008. We will prepare for that great appointment reflecting together on the theme *The Holy Spirit and the mission* in successive stages. This year our attention will focus on the Holy Spirit, *Spirit of Truth*, who reveals Christ to us, the Word made flesh, opening the heart of each one to the Word of salvation that leads to the fullness of Truth. Next year, 2007, we will meditate on a verse from the Gospel of John: "*Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another*" (13:34). We will discover more about the Holy Spirit, *Spirit of Love*, who infuses divine charity within us and makes us aware of the material and spiritual needs of our brothers and sisters. We will finally reach the world meeting of 2008 and its theme will be: "*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses*" (Acts 1:8).

From this moment onwards, my dear young friends, in a climate of constant listening to the word of God, call on the Holy Spirit, *Spirit of fortitude and witness*, that you may be able to proclaim the Gospel without fear even to the ends of the earth. Our Lady was present in the cenacle with the Apostles as they waited for Pentecost. May she be your mother and guide. May she teach you to receive the word of God, to treasure it and to ponder on it in your heart (cf *Lk 2:19*) as she did throughout her life. May she encourage you to declare your "yes" to the Lord as you live "the obedience of faith". May she help you to remain strong in the faith, constant in hope, persevering in charity, always attentive to the word of God. I am together with you in prayer, and I bless each one of you with all my heart.

From the Vatican, 22 February 2006, Feast of the Chair of Saint Peter Apostle.

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