

PRE-SYNODAL MEETING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE
AT THE INTERNATIONAL PONTIFICAL COLLEGE "MARIA MATER ECCLESIAE"

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

Monday, 19 March 2018

Dear young people, Good morning!

I greet all 15,340 of you! Let us hope that tomorrow there will be more of you in our conversation, to bring forth what each of you and we have in our hearts. Speak courageously. Without shame. Here shame is left outside the door. We must speak with courage: I say what I feel and if someone feels offended, I ask forgiveness and I move on. You know how to speak like this. But we must listen with humility. If a person speaks and I am not fond of him, I have to listen to him more, because everyone has the right to be heard, just as everyone has the right to speak.

Thank you for having accepted the invitation to come here. Some of you have had to make a long journey. Others, instead of going to sleep — because for them it is time to go to sleep — are linked up with you. They will spend the night listening. You come from many parts of the world and bring with you a great variety of peoples, cultures and even religions: you are not all Catholics and Christians, not even all are believers, but you are certainly all inspired by the desire to give the best of yourselves. And I have no doubt about this. I also greet those who will link up, and those who have already done so: thank you for your contribution!

I wish to thank in a special way the Secretariat of the Synod, the Cardinal Secretary, the Archbishop Secretary and all, all those who work in the Secretariat of the Synod. They have worked hard for this and have been inventive and have demonstrated great creativity. Thank you so much, Cardinal Baldisseri, and all your collaborators.

You have been invited because your contribution is essential. We need you in order to prepare the Synod which will bring together the Bishops in October on the theme “Young people, Faith and Vocational Discernment”. In many moments in the history of the Church, as in numerous Biblical episodes, God wished to speak through the youngest: I think, for example, of Samuel, David and Daniel. I very much like the story of Samuel when he hears God’s voice. The Bible says: “the word of the Lord was rare in those days”. It was a disoriented people. It was a young man who opened that door. In difficult moments, the Lord moves history forward with young people. They tell the truth; they are not ashamed. I do not say that they are “shameless”, but they are not ashamed and they tell the truth. And David as a young man starts off with that courage. Even with his sins. Because it is interesting, all these young people were not born saints; they were not born righteous, models for the others. They are all sinful men and women, but who felt the desire to do something good. God drove them and they went forth. And this is beautiful. We can think: “These things are for the right

people, for priests and nuns”. No, they are for everyone. And especially for you young people, because you have so much strength to speak up, to feel things, to laugh, even to cry. We adults very often, very often, forget the ability to cry; we have become accustomed: “The world is like this ... they can make do”. And we move on. Therefore I urge you, please: be courageous in these days; say everything that comes to you; and if you are wrong, another will correct you. But forward, with courage!

1. Too often we talk about young people without allowing ourselves to be challenged by them. When someone wants to launch a campaign or something, they say, ah, let us commend the young! — it is true, isn't it? — but they do not allow young people to challenge them. Dispensing praise is a way of satisfying people. But people are not silly or stupid. No they are not. People understand. Only fools do not understand. In Spanish there is a beautiful saying: “Praise the fool and you will see him work”. Give him a pat on the shoulder and he will be happy, because he is a fool; he does not realize. But you are not fools! Even the best analyses focusing on the world of youth, while useful — they are useful — do not supplant the need for face-to-face encounter. They speak about today's youth. Out of curiosity, look up how many articles, how many conferences, talk about today's youth. I would like to tell you one thing: youth does not exist! There are young people, stories, faces, glances, illusions. Young people exist. Talking about youth is easy. Abstractions, percentages are used ... No. Your face, your heart, what does it say? Conversing with, listening to the young. Sometimes, obviously, young people are not Nobel laureates in prudence. No. Sometimes they speak bluntly. Life is like that, but you have to listen to them.

Some might think it would be easier to keep you at “a safe distance”, so as not to be provoked by you. But it is not enough to exchange the odd message, or share nice photographs. Young people must be taken seriously! It seems we are surrounded by a culture that, on the one hand idolizes youth, trying to prevent its passing, yet on the other it excludes many young people from being protagonists. It is a cosmetic philosophy. People age and try to apply makeup to seem younger, but they do not allow young people to grow. This is very common. Why? Because they do not allow themselves to be challenged. It is important. Often you are marginalized from ordinary public life and you find yourself begging for jobs that do not guarantee you a future. I do not know if this happens in all your countries, but in many... If I am not mistaken, the rate of youth unemployment here in Italy, for those 25 years of age and over, is around 35%. In another European country bordering Italy, it is 47%. In another European country near Italy, it is more than 50%. What can a young person do if he or she cannot find work? He becomes ill — sinks into depression, addiction; he commits suicide. It makes us think: the statistics on youth suicide are all manipulated, all of them; he becomes a rebel — but it is a way of committing suicide — either he takes a plane and goes to a city I do not want to name and enrolls in isis, or he joins one of those guerrilla movements. At least it gives some sense to life and he'll have a monthly wage. And this is a social sin! Society is responsible for this. But I would like you to outline the causes and what the reasons for them are, and do not say, “I don't really know why either”. How do you experience this dramatic situation? It would help us greatly. Too often you are left alone. But the truth is also the fact that you are builders of culture, with your style and your originality. It is a relative distance, as you are capable of building a culture that perhaps cannot be seen, but which goes forth. We want this space [of encounter] in order to hear about your culture, about what you are building.

In the Church — I am convinced — it should not be this way: closing the door, without listening. The Gospel asks us: its message of closeness invites us to encounter and exchange,

to accept and love each other seriously, to journey together and to share without fear. And this Pre-Synodal Meeting should be a sign of something great: the Church's willingness to listen to all the young, without exclusion. And this is not a political ploy. It is not out of an artificial "pro-youth", no, but because we need to better understand what God and history are asking of us. If you are not present, then a part of the access to God is missing.

2. The upcoming Synod proposes in particular to develop the conditions for the young to be accompanied with passion and competence in vocational discernment, that is, "to recognize and accept the call to the fullness of life and love". We all have this calling. You, in the initial phase, are young. This is the fundamental certainty: God loves each one of us, and addresses a call to each one personally. It is a gift that, when it is discovered, fills us with joy (cf. Mt 13:44-46). Be sure: God trusts in you; He loves you and he calls to you. And there will never be any shortcoming on his part, because he is faithful and truly believes in you. God is faithful. For the believers, I say, "God is faithful". I ask you the question that one day He asked the first disciples: "What are you seeking?" (Jn 1:38). I too, in this moment, ask each one of you a question: "What are you seeking? You, what are you seeking in your life?". Tell us; it will do us good to listen to you. Tell us. We are in need of this: to hear of your journey in life. What do you seek? I invite you to share the search of life with Him, to journey together. And we, we wish to do likewise, because we cannot but share with enthusiasm the search for each person's true joy, and we cannot keep only to ourselves He who has changed our life: Jesus. Your peers and your friends, even without knowing it, also await a call to salvation.

3. The next Synod will also be a call to the Church, to rediscover a *renewed youthful dynamism*. I have been able to read some of the emails of the questionnaire published online by the Secretariat of the Synod and I was struck by the appeal launched by various young people who ask adults to be close to them and help them with important decisions. One girl observed that young people lack points of reference and no one motivates them to utilize the resources they possess. Then, alongside the positive aspects of the world of youth, she highlighted the dangers, including alcohol, drugs, and sexuality lived in a consumerist manner. Aren't these addictions? And she concluded almost with a cry: "Help the world of the young that is increasingly falling apart". I do not know if the world of the young is increasingly falling apart, I do not know. But I feel that this girl's cry is sincere, and demands attention. It is up to you to respond to this girl, to converse with this girl. She is one of you and we need to see where this wake-up call leads us. In the Church too we must learn new forms of presence and closeness. It is very important. I am reminded of when Moses wanted to tell the People of God what lays at the core of God's love. And he says: "What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to Him?" Love is nearness. And they, the youth of today, ask the Church to be close to them. You Christians, you who believe in Christ's closeness, you Catholics: be close, not distant. And you know well that there are many, many ways of being distant, many. You educate everyone, with white gloves, but keep a distance so as not to get your hands dirty. Today's young people demand closeness from us: Catholics, Christians, believers, and non-believers. Everyone. And to this end, one young person enthusiastically recounted his attendance at various meetings with these words; he said: "among us young people, the most important thing is the presence of religious as friends who listen to us, know us and advise us". Consecrated men and women who are close to us. They listen; they understand, and to those who seek counsel, they give advice. I know some of you who do this.

The Second Vatican Council's splendid Message to Youth comes to mind. Today too it is a stimulus to combat all selfishness and to courageously build a better world. It is an invitation to seek new paths and to journey along them boldly and trustfully, keeping our gaze fixed on Jesus and opening ourselves to the Holy Spirit, to rejuvenate the very countenance of the Church. Because it is in Jesus and in the Spirit that the Church finds the strength to continuously renew herself, carrying out a living review of her way of being, asking forgiveness for her frailties and inadequacies, sparing no effort in placing herself at the service of all, with the sole intention of being faithful to the mission that the Lord has entrusted to her: living and announcing the Gospel.

4. Dear young people, the heart of the Church is young precisely because the Gospel is like a lifeblood that continuously regenerates it. It is up to us to be obedient and *to cooperate in this fruitfulness*. And all of you can collaborate in this fruitfulness: whether you are Catholic Christians, or of other religions, or non-believers. We ask you to collaborate in our fruitfulness, to give life. We do this in this Synodal journey too, thinking of the situation of young people all over the world. We need to regain the enthusiasm of faith and the taste for searching. We need to rediscover in the Lord the strength to recover from failures, to go forward, to strengthen our confidence in the future. And we need to dare to set out on new paths. Do not be afraid: dare to take new paths, even if this involves risks. A man or a woman who does not take risks, does not mature. An institution that chooses not to risk remains a child and does not grow up. Take risks, accompanied by caution, by advice, but go forward. Without risking, do you know what happens to a young person? He ages! He retires at 20! A young person grows old, and the Church grows old too. I say this with sorrow. How often I find Christian communities, even young ones, that are old. They have aged because they were afraid. Afraid of what? To go out, to go out to life's existential peripheries, to go where the future is played out. One thing is prudence, which is a virtue, but another is fear. We need you young people, living stones of a Church with a young face, but not made up, as I said: not artificially rejuvenated, but revived from within. And you challenge us to emerge from the logic that says, "but it's always been like that". And that logic, please, is poisonous. It is a sweet poison, because it calms your soul and leaves you as though you were anesthetized, unable to walk. Emerge from the logic of "it has always been done this way", so as to follow creatively the tracks of authentic, yet creative, Christian tradition. I recommend that Christians read the Book of the Acts of the Apostles: the creativity of those men. Those men knew how to go onwards with a creativity that if we were to translate it into what it means today, it would frighten us! Create a new culture, but take care: this culture cannot be "uprooted". One step forward, but look at the roots! Do not go back to the roots, because you will end up buried: take a step forward, but always with roots. And the roots — forgive me, this is in my heart — are the elderly, the good elderly. The roots are grandparents. The roots are those who have lived their lives and those whom this throwaway culture discards; they are not useful, it sends them away. The elderly have this charisma of bringing roots. Talk to the elderly. "But what shall I say?" Try! I remember talking to young people once in Buenos Aires, I said: "Why don't you go to a retirement home to play the guitar for the elderly who are there?" — "But, Father ..." — "Go, just for an hour". [They stayed] more than two hours! They did not want to leave, because the old men who were like that [a little sleepy], they heard the guitar and they woke up, they woke up, they woke up and started [talking], and the young people heard things that touched them inside. They took this wisdom and went forth. The Prophet Joel illustrates this so well, so well. In the third chapter. For me this is today's prophecy: "Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams". We need young prophets but take care: you will never be prophets if you do not seize the dreams of the elderly. What's more: if you do not go and make an elderly person dream, an elderly

person who is bored because no one listens to him. Make the elderly dream and these dreams will help you to go onward; Joel 2:28. Read this, it will do you good. Let yourself be challenged by them.

In order to tune in to the same wavelength as the younger generations, intense dialogue is of great help. Therefore, I invite you this week to express yourselves frankly and freely, as I said and repeat. Be brazen. You are the protagonists and it is important that you speak openly. “But I am embarrassed, the Cardinal will hear me...”. Let him hear; he is used to it. I assure you that your contribution will be taken seriously. I thank you now, and I ask you, please, not to forget to pray for me. And those who cannot pray, because they do not know how to do so, at least think well of me. Thank you.