

Message of the Holy Father Francis for the 36th World Youth Day (Solemnity of Christ the King, 21 November 2021)

"Get up! I am a witness to what you have seen" (cf. Acts 26:16)

Dear young people!

I would like once again to take you by the hand to continue together on the spiritual pilgrimage that leads us to World Youth Day in Lisbon in 2023.

Last year, just before the pandemic spread, I signed the message whose theme was "Young, I tell you, get up!" (cf. *Lk* 7:14). In his providence, the Lord already wanted to prepare us for the very hard challenge we were about to live.

Throughout the world, the suffering of the loss of so many loved ones and social isolation has had to be faced. The health emergency has also prevented you young people - by nature projected outwards - from going out to school, university, work, to meet each other ... You have found yourself in difficult situations, which you were not used to. manage. Those who were less prepared and unsupported felt disoriented. Family problems have emerged in many cases, as well as unemployment, depression, loneliness and addictions. Not to mention the accumulated stress, the tensions and outbursts of anger, the increase in violence.

But thank God this isn't the only side of the coin. If the test has shown us our frailties, it has also brought out our virtues, including the predisposition to solidarity. In every part of the world we have seen many people, including many young people, fighting for life, sowing hope, defending freedom and justice, being peacemakers and builders of bridges.

When a young man falls, humanity falls in a sense. But it is also true that when a young person gets up, it is as if the whole world gets up. Dear young people, what great potential there is in your hands! What strength you carry in your hearts!

So today, once again, God says to each of you: "Get up!". I hope with all my heart that this message will help us prepare for new times, for a new page in the history of humanity. But there is no possibility of starting over without you, dear young people. To get up, the world needs your strength, your enthusiasm, your passion. It is in this sense that I would like to meditate with you on the passage from the *Acts of the Apostles* in which Jesus says to Paul: "Get up! I constitute you a witness of what you have seen" (cf. *Acts* 26:16).

Paul as witness before the king

The verse that inspired the theme of World Youth Day 2021 is taken from the testimony of Paul in front of King Agrippa, while he is being held in prison. He, once an enemy and persecutor of Christians, is now judged precisely for his faith in Christ. After about twenty-five years, the Apostle tells his story and the fundamental episode of his encounter with Christ.

Paul confesses that in the past he had persecuted Christians, until one day, while on his way to Damascus to arrest some of them, a light "brighter than the sun" enveloped him and his

traveling companions (cf. *Acts* 26:13), but only he heard " a voice ": Jesus spoke to him and called him by name.

"Saul, Saul!"

Let's explore this event together. Calling him by name, the Lord makes it clear to Saul that he knows him personally. It is as if she were saying to him: "I know who you are, I know what you are up to, but nevertheless I am speaking to you". He calls him twice, as a sign of a special and very important vocation, as he did with Moses (cf. *Ex* 3 : 4) and with Samuel (cf. *1 Sam* 3:10). Falling to the ground, Saul recognizes that he is witness to a divine manifestation, a powerful revelation, which upsets him, but does not annihilate him, on the contrary, he challenges him by name.

Indeed, only a personal, non-anonymous encounter with Christ changes life. Jesus shows that he knows Saul well, that he "knows him inside". Even if Saul is a persecutor, even if in his heart there is hatred for Christians, Jesus knows that this is due to ignorance and wants to show his mercy in him. It will be precisely this grace, this undeserved and unconditional love, the light that will radically transform Saul's life.

"Who are you, Lord?"

Faced with this mysterious presence that calls him by name, Saul asks: "Who are you, oh Lord?" (*Acts* 26:15). This question is extremely important and we all have to ask it sooner or later in life. It is not enough to have heard of Christ from others, it is necessary to speak with him personally. This, after all, is praying. It is speaking directly to Jesus, even if our hearts are still in disorder, our minds full of doubts or even contempt for Christ and Christians. I hope that every young person, from the bottom of his heart, will come to ask this question: "Who are you, O Lord?".

We cannot assume that everyone knows Jesus, even in the age of the internet. The question that many people ask Jesus and the Church is precisely this: "Who are you?". In the whole story of St. Paul's vocation, it is the only time he speaks. And to his question, the Lord promptly replies: "I am Jesus, whom you persecute" (*ibid.*).

"I am Jesus, whom you persecute!"

Through this response, the Lord Jesus reveals to Saul a great mystery: that he identifies himself with the Church, with Christians. Until then, Saul had seen nothing of Christ except the faithful whom he had imprisoned (cf. *Acts* 26:10), for whose death sentence he himself had voted (*ibid.*). And he had seen how Christians responded to evil with good, to hatred with love, accepting the injustices, violence, calumnies and persecutions suffered for the name of Christ. So, on closer inspection, Saul somehow - without knowing it - had encountered Christ: he had encountered him in Christians!

How many times have we heard it said: "Jesus yes, the Church no", as if one could be an alternative to the other. You cannot know Jesus if you don't know the Church. One cannot know Jesus except through the brothers and sisters of his community. We cannot say that we are fully Christian if we do not live the ecclesial dimension of faith.

"It's hard for you to turn against the goad"

These are the words the Lord addresses to Saul after he falls to the ground. But it is as if for some time now he has been talking to him in a mysterious way, trying to draw him to himself, and Saul is resisting. Our Lord addresses that same sweet "rebuke" to every young person who goes away: "How long will you flee from me? Why don't you hear me calling you? I am waiting for your return ". Like the prophet Jeremiah, we sometimes say: "I will think of him no more" (*Jer 20: 9*). But in everyone's heart there is like a burning fire: even if we try to contain it, we cannot, because it is stronger than us.

The Lord chooses one who even persecutes him, completely hostile to him and his own. But there is no person who is irrecoverable for God. Through the personal encounter with him it is always possible to start over. No young person is out of the reach of God's grace and mercy. No one can say: it is too far ... it is too late ... to love with all their strength, to identify with a mission! Jesus, in the young Saul, sees exactly this.

Recognize your own blindness

We can imagine that, before his encounter with Christ, Saul was in a certain sense "full of himself", considering himself "great" for his moral integrity, for his zeal, for his origins, for his culture. He was certainly convinced that he was right. But, when the Lord reveals himself to him, he is "knocked down" and finds himself blind. Suddenly he finds he is unable to see, not only physically but also spiritually. His certainties waver. In his soul he feels that what animated him with so much passion - the zeal to eliminate Christians - was completely wrong. He realizes that he is not the absolute holder of the truth, rather that he is far from it. And, together with its certainties, its "greatness" also falls. Suddenly he finds himself lost, fragile, "small".

This humility - awareness of one's own limitation - is fundamental! Those who think they know everything about themselves, about others and even about religious truths will find it hard to meet Christ. Saul, having gone blind, has lost his points of reference. Left alone in the dark, the only things clear to him are the light he saw and the voice he heard. What a paradox: just when one recognizes that he is blind, he begins to see!

After the electrocution on the road to Damascus, Saul would prefer to be called Paul, which means "little one". It is not a *nickname* or a "stage name" - nowadays so much in use even among ordinary people: the encounter with Christ made him really feel this way, breaking down the wall that prevented him from knowing himself in truth. He affirms of himself: "For I am the least of the apostles and I am not worthy to be called an apostle because I persecuted the Church of God" (*1 Cor 15: 9*).

Saint Therese of Lisieux, like other saints, loved to repeat that humility is the truth. Nowadays many "stories" season our days, especially on social networks, often artfully constructed with lots of *sets*, cameras, various backgrounds. We are increasingly looking for the limelight, wisely oriented, to be able to show "friends" and *followers* an image of oneself that sometimes does not reflect one's own truth. Christ, the midday light, comes to enlighten us and restore our authenticity, freeing us from all masks. He shows us clearly what we are, because he loves us as we are.

Change perspective

Paul's conversion is not a turning back, but opening up to a totally new perspective. In fact, he continues his journey towards Damascus, but he is no longer the same as before, he is a different person (cf. *Acts* 22:10). We can be converted and renewed in ordinary life, doing the things we usually do, but with a transformed heart and different motivations. In this case, Jesus specifically asks Paul to go as far as Damascus, where he was headed. Paul obeys, but now the purpose and perspective of his journey have radically changed. From now on, he will see reality with new eyes. First they were those of the executioner persecutor, from now on they will be those of the witness disciple. In Damascus, Ananias baptized him and introduced him to the Christian community. In silence and prayer, Paul will deepen his own experience and the new identity given to him by the Lord Jesus.

Do not waste the strength and passion of young people

Paul's attitude before the encounter with the risen Jesus is not so foreign to us. How much strength and how much passion also live in your hearts, dear young people! But if the darkness around you and within you prevents you from seeing correctly, you risk getting lost in meaningless battles, even becoming violent. And unfortunately the first victims will be yourself and those closest to you. There is also the danger of fighting for causes which originally defend just values, but which, taken to exasperation, become destructive ideologies. How many young people today, perhaps driven by their own political or religious convictions, end up becoming instruments of violence and destruction in the lives of many! Some, digital natives, find the new battlefield in the virtual environment and social networks, *fake news* to spread poisons and demolish their opponents.

When the Lord bursts into Paul's life, he does not cancel his personality, he does not cancel his zeal and his passion, but uses these qualities to make him the great evangelizer to the ends of the earth.

Apostle of the Gentiles

Paul later will be known as "the apostle to the Gentiles": he, who had been a scrupulous Pharisee observing the Law! Here is another paradox: the Lord places his trust precisely in the one who persecuted him. Like Paul, each of us can hear in the depths of our hearts this voice that tells him: "I trust you. I know your story and I take it in my hands, together with you. Even if you have often been against me, I choose you and make you my witness ". Divine logic can make the worst persecutor a great witness.

The disciple of Christ is called to be "the light of the world" (*Mt* 5:14). Paul has to testify what he saw, but now he is blind. We are back to the paradox! But precisely through this personal experience of his, Paul will be able to identify with those to whom the Lord sends him. In fact, he is constituted a witness "to open their eyes, so that they may be converted from darkness to light" (*Acts* 26:18).

"Stand up and testify!"

In embracing the new life given to us in baptism, we also receive a mission from the Lord: "You will be my witness!". It is a mission to dedicate oneself to, which changes one's life.

Today Christ's invitation to Paul is addressed to each and every one of you young people: Get up! You cannot remain on the ground to "feel sorry for yourself", there is a mission that awaits you! You too can witness the works that Jesus has begun to do in you. Therefore, in the name of Christ, I tell you:

- Get up and bear witness to your experience as a blind man who has encountered the light, has seen the good and beauty of God in himself, in others and in the communion of the Church that overcomes all loneliness.
- Stand up and bear witness to the love and respect that can be established in human relationships, in family life, in the dialogue between parents and children, between young and old.
- Stand up and stand up for social justice, truth and righteousness, human rights, the persecuted, the poor and vulnerable, those who have no voice in society, immigrants.
- Get up and witness the new gaze that makes you see creation with eyes full of wonder, makes you recognize the Earth as our common home and gives you the courage to defend integral ecology.
- Stand up and testify that failed existences can be rebuilt, that people already dead in spirit can be resurrected, that enslaved people can become free again, that hearts oppressed by sadness can find hope.
- Stand up and joyfully testify that Christ lives! Spread his message of love and salvation among your peers, at school, college, at work, in the digital world, anywhere.

The Lord, the Church, the Pope trust you and constitute you witnesses to the many other young people you meet on the "streets of Damascus" of our time. Do not forget: «If one has really experienced the love of God who saves him, he does not need a lot of preparation time to go and announce it, he cannot wait for many lessons or long instructions to be imparted to him. Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus "(Apostolic *Exhortation Evangelii gaudium* , 120).

Stand up and celebrate WYD in the particular Churches!

I renew to all of you, young people of the world, the invitation to take part in this spiritual pilgrimage that will lead us to celebrate the World Youth Day in Lisbon in 2023. The next appointment, however, is in your particular Churches, in the various dioceses and eparchies of the world, where, on the solemnity of Christ the King, the 2021 World Youth Day will be celebrated locally.

I hope that all of us can live these stages as true pilgrims and not as "tourists of faith"! Let us open ourselves to the surprises of God, who wants to let his light shine on our path. Let us open ourselves to listen to his voice, also through our brothers and sisters. Thus we will help each other to get up together, and in this difficult historical moment we will become prophets of new times, full of hope! May the Blessed Virgin Mary intercede for us.

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