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10th INTERNATIONAL YOUTH FORUM
“Learning to Love”
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Concluding address

1. As we conclude the sessions of the 10th International Youth Forum, we thank the Lord for the gift of this time we have spent together listening to his word. For these few days, God has been here at the centre of his youthful Church. Like a sower, He planted in your young hearts the seed of his Word, and with it He gave you hope and renewed strength so that you may carry through and give substance to the life plan opening up before you. This has been a time of review and questioning for all of us, including those of us who are not so young. We must willingly receive the word that Christ has given us with deep gratitude and a keen sense of responsibility. The message that he is conveying to us here and now is for the rest of our lives, and the seeds that are being sown now should never be lost and never die of thirst.

What has this Forum meant for us? I think that it was a time of great discoveries. The first of these is the one that determines our lives: the discovery of God’s love for us. Over the past few days, we have experienced the amazement of feeling personally loved by God. All that we have been listening to about love could not be described as merely theoretical discourses, but rather as keys to help us decipher, so to speak, the love that God has for each one of us. We come to understand that our strength is to be found in that love, and that we must reflect it in a world that is so much in need of that love.

We have discovered the beauty of true love, a fascinating yet distant journey, and its special characteristic is the ability to constantly give oneself to others, to be prepared to give one’s life for others. We have heard about the priceless treasure for which it is worthwhile giving up everything, as in the case of the precious pearl in the gospel parable. We have come to realise that if we wish to experience and safeguard love, then we must grow to the stature of someone who can take on permanent commitments and responsibility for another that lasts forever. We have been shown the great beauty of matrimony, the sacrament through which God consecrates the love between a man and a woman that becomes fruitful love through their indissoluble union of soul and body. We have discovered the beauty of a love that relinquishes everything for the sake of total self-giving to Christ and the service of the Church, the beauty of a vocation to the priesthood. It is a demanding call, reserved for those who are capable of a love so great that they wish to retrace the footsteps of the Master. Perhaps this is a desire that entered the heart of one of you during these past few days. Maybe it is a call that another of you has heard before and that now has called again.

We have discovered the beauty of a love that chooses virginity for the Kingdom of God,

a striking sign of life that shapes itself according to an eschatological horizon, the ultimate goal. This is the beauty of a vocation to religious life and to consecrated life. There is great need to have people among us who live their love through their consecration to God. Christian couples can receive so much help from the witness of lives like these that speak of oblatinal love. It reminds them of the need to constantly purify themselves of the temptation to utilise others in trying to satisfy the different forms that selfishness can take.

We have discovered that it is beautiful to be Christians, disciples of Jesus Christ. We know that Christianity is not as its detractors claim and that the mass media can often spread a deliberately distorted viewpoint. Christianity is not a burdensome weight of prohibitions that stifle our freedom and our desire for happiness. On the contrary, it is a positive and fascinating life plan. We have been able to verify this over the past few days. Pope Benedict XVI has not ceased to remind us of this since the beginning of his pontificate. Nothing in our lives can equal the beauty of an encounter with Christ, and nothing in his Gospel can astound us anymore.

Finally, we have discovered that there are young people like you who are not like those portrayed daily by newspapers and television. Your presence here at this Forum is proof that a new generation of youth is emerging who are asking about the true meaning of life and who are drawing close to the person of Jesus Christ. Pope Benedict XVI often refers to a well-known concept in the philosophy of history, the so-called “creative minority” who carry forward the values that determine the future of humanity. I am convinced that you and young people like you are an expression of this. On you depends the future of the world and the future of the Church.

2. This Forum has been a time brightened by hope because of all we have discovered or come to understand better. It has shown that in each of you, in each young person, even in those who may seem to think of nothing besides the Saturday night disco, there are enormous resources. In each of you there is something that can start afresh. We must regain hope! Young people especially must recover the ability to hope. Without hope, life has neither foundation nor goal. As Benedict XVI wrote in the introduction to *Spe Salvi*, the encyclical he wrote on the theme of hope, “Redemption is offered to us in the sense that we have been given hope, trustworthy hope, by virtue of which we can face our present: the present, even if it is arduous, can be lived and accepted if it leads towards a goal, if we can be sure of this goal, and if this goal is great enough to justify the effort of the journey”¹. So, never despair. Even if you happen to make mistakes or make the wrong choices, never lose hope. You are not journeying alone.

After the Forum, do not interrupt the conversation that the Lord has opened with you, but rather, get your friends to join in. Share this experience with them, one that is decisive in each young person’s life. Share with them the many wonderful messages that you have received from the lectures, the panel discussions, and especially from the beautiful testimonies. Perhaps some of you are wondering how to do this when you get home and how to begin. If you will permit me, I would like to give you some suggestions.

Put your trust in God. Entrust to God your whole selves, your present and your future. As

¹ BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Spe Salvi*, no. 1.

Benedict XVI said to young people when he started his pontificate, “If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. [...] Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed. [...] He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything”.²

Keep in your hearts the great ideals, passion and the demanding predisposition to reach out towards the Absolute that is so characteristic of youth. As someone said, youth is a disease that is soon cured... We all grow older, and we tend to allow ourselves to be switched off, to give up and to be satisfied with less. Do not give into this temptation. Do not barter true love, pure love and self-giving love for simulations of love. Aim for noble goals. Listen to the encouragement that John Paul II gave to young people in Santiago de Compostela in 1989: Do not fly low near ground level! Fly at high altitude! Do not be afraid of becoming saints!

Educate your freedom. Do not equate freedom with impulsiveness. Freedom requires discernment. Nor should you see it as being the opposite of commitment. Only really free people who are in control of themselves are capable of taking on long-lasting commitments, those that are taken for life and not only for a day, for a month, or for as long as they last.

If this is the kind of life we want, we have to be ready to be converted to the Lord each day, and to constantly question ourselves before God. Conversion is a gift, but we have to want it. We must recognise the transition we have to make in order to achieve full life. Like the Prodigal Son, we have to realise that if we want to live again we must return to the Father. Do not forget that the best place for this process is the sacrament of Reconciliation, confession. This is where Jesus Christ cures our often wounded and fragile freedom. He gives us the strength to start again.

One final observation: one of the greatest risks for young people today is loneliness. Well then, the Lord is calling you to rediscover the importance of the Christian community. We are weak when we are alone. Over the past few days you have experienced how easy it is to journey towards the Light when you are with others and you support each other. Build community with people who share your ideals, who have made the same discoveries and who believe in true love. Be committed in these communities because that will be your strength.

The real work of the Forum is about to begin, at the moment when you prepare to return to your countries. I am sure that none of you will return unchanged. Jesus’ words have stirred something within you. Jesus has planted a seed in your lives. You need to cultivate this seed if it is not to die. Take it to others and share it with others. As this Forum is drawing to a close, Christ is sending you out to witness to what you have seen, heard and experienced here. Saint John wrote in his first letter: “We have known and believe the love that God has for us” (*1 Jn* 4: 16). This is the experience we have had here, and I am sure that each one of you can declare: I now know and better understand how much God loves me. Biographies of Saint Francis – perhaps the most beloved of Catholic saints – tell us of how the saint used to go through the streets crying and calling out: “Love is not loved, Love is not loved!”. How much louder his cries would be today, eight centuries later, in Assisi, in Rome, in every city of the world! Love is not loved. I hope that you will

² BENEDICT XVI, Mass for the inauguration of the Pontificate, 24 April 2005.

return to your countries after this Forum, to your homes, universities and workplaces, filled with God's love, in love with the love that God revealed in Jesus Christ. Have courage, my dear young people! God trusts in you and depends on each one of you. He will give you the strength and courage needed to go against the tide, to fly much higher than the mediocre diktats of the dominant culture of our times.