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THE CHRISTIAN EDUCATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE –
A PRIORITY IN THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

Rev. Fabio Attard sdb
General Councillor for Salesian Youth Ministry

PART TWO
YOUTH MINISTRY – A VERY SIGNIFICANT EXPERIENCE OF CHURCH

Let us go back in time to March 1985 when Blessed John Paul II called young people together to celebrate International Youth Year. In his letter to mark the occasion, *Dilecti Amici*,¹ and in his address to the young people gathered in Rome,² we find two essential elements that together present a clear vision of youth ministry.

The first element can be found in *Dilecti Amici*. This letter contains a reflection based on the story of the meeting between Jesus and the rich young man that we find in the synoptic gospels (cf. *Mk* 10:17-22; *Mt* 19:16-22; *Lk* 18:18-23). The point made is that every meeting with the Lord Jesus goes beyond fulfilling an obligation. **Its aim is holiness:** “In this same context the series of commandments which constitute the fundamental code of Christian morality is completed by the series of evangelical counsels, which in a special way express and make concrete Christ's call to perfection, which is a call to holiness. When the young man asks about the ‘more’: ‘What do I still lack?’, Jesus looks upon him with love, and this love finds here a new meaning. Man is carried interiorly, by the hand of the Holy Spirit, from a life according to the commandments to a life in the awareness of the gift, and Christ's loving look expresses this interior ‘transition’. And Jesus says: ‘If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.’ (*Mt* 19:21)” (no.8).

The goal of holiness, however, needs to have **an environment, a community that will ensure the full attainment of holiness**. Holiness is not something you achieve alone and it is not an experience to be found in isolation.

It is in his address to young people, together with the letter cited above, that Blessed John Paul II puts the foundations in place for healthy and wholesome youth ministry.

The pope takes the theme “participation” and develops it in the direction of participation in the

¹ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic letter to the youth of the world, Palm Sunday, 31 March 1985.

² John Paul II, Address on the occasion of the Opening of International Youth Year, St John Lateran Square, 30 March 1985.

mystery of Christ: “the Church is a school where we learn to participate... (no.5). The Church, therefore, teaches us how to participate by bringing us into communion with Christ’s mystery, especially with the paschal mystery, that is, with his passion, death and resurrection. This is the mystery of the redemption, the covenant that God made with all of humankind. It was drawn up in blood, in the sacrifice of God’s Son, Jesus Christ Our Lord. We too are called to this covenant, and this participation is continuous and regular” (no.6).

These words addressed to young people point to a goal that is the soul of our pastoral ministry. It is the force that attracts people in such a way that they feel called to be part of God’s love for humanity. Here the pope points to an essential criterion for youth ministry: “Dear young people, I am thinking of the various groups, communities and movements of which many of you form part. Do not forget this! The authenticity of these associations can be measured by a very clear criterion: the group, community or movement to which you belong is authentic to the extent that it helps you to take part in the salvific mission of the Church. It thus helps you to fulfil your Christian vocation in the various fields in which providence has set you to work” (no.7).

The pope tells us that taking part in the mission of the Church is a very clear criterion by which to take measure. Here he is repeating a point that Paul VI insisted on at the start of the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN).³ In connection with this criterion, I would like to present two ideas. I hope that these ideas will help us in our pastoral ministry.

3. An integral pastoral experience that requires our awareness

As people with a calling to a ministry of animation and leadership at the level of groups, communities and movements, we are asked to be aware of the importance of really understanding our great responsibility: “for the presentation of the Gospel message is not an optional contribution for the Church. It is the duty incumbent on her by the command of the Lord Jesus, so that people can believe and be saved. This message is indeed necessary. It is unique. It cannot be replaced. It does not permit either indifference, syncretism or accommodation” (EN no.5).

It may be that we note a certain “lack of fecundity in evangelisation today”⁴, and this means that we should take the opportunity to deal with the issues that arise from the challenges we face in our times.

3.1 To be familiar with the culture before presenting a faith itinerary

The first point we need to address seriously is the prerequisite to be well acquainted with the culture in which we are moving. We believe in God who became incarnate in order to be human like us, and we see how this event did not take place outside time and history. The fact of the incarnation invites us, even obliges us, to listen to that dialogue with human history, and this is something that we cannot disregard.

If we look at the first few paragraphs of *Gaudium et Spes*, we see that it gives a splendid synthesis of that call to **know and understand the world in which we live**: “That is why they

³ See *Evangelii Nuntiandi* no. 6-16.

⁴ See the press conference held after the Synod of Bishops general secretariat council meeting, 16 February 2012.

[the Christian community] cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history... (no.1) In every age, the church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, if it is to carry out its task. In language intelligible to every generation, it should be able to answer the ever recurring questions which people ask about the meaning of this present life and of the life to come, and how one is related to the other. We must be aware of and understand the aspirations, the yearnings, and the often dramatic features of the world in which we live” (no.4).

If we look through the documents and reflections of the teachings of the Church, we find that systematic and consistent attention is given to the need for the community of believers to have an attitude of intelligent awareness of the culture and signs of their times. In a society like ours, there is no doubt that the cultural and social paradigms are changing, and in fact they are in a permanent state of change. This means that it is even more essential to keep this dialogue open and to keep learning more about it. We must not neglect to take up this challenge.

In the specific case of youth ministry, it is **no longer an added extra to invest time and study in learning about youth culture**. There are two specific reasons for this. First of all, if we do not have a clear understanding of the youth of today, we run the risk of allowing ourselves to be guided by information which provides *cliché* notions about youth that do not actually correspond to the experiences of young people.

I shall give an example. We never hear about the fact that since 1995 the signs have been that the spiritual and religious search of young people has been increasing. We do not see in newspapers and magazines things that we are observing and experiencing at pastoral level in our meetings and courses. The fact that young people are searching and take part in activities is something that does not reach the front page of newspapers.

In addition to this point, there is a second more important one. Those of us who are familiar with the literature of sociology and anthropology know that the **prophecies foretelling the demise of religion and religious practice have been widely refuted**. In fact, this generation of young people whose families have not handed on the faith to them, have found themselves being led into a desert devoid of meaning and a very dark tomorrow. It is they who are searching today for experiences that are meaningful. The alternatives offered to take the place of the so-called outmoded and backward-looking religious outlook, have proved to be empty, and moreover, harmful. They are not only unsubstantial, but also unbeneficial. As believers, we must not fail to take this research into consideration with all its anthropological and spiritual bends and curves.

This is why it is important to know the background to our young people’s stories, to be ready to journey with them, to serve them humbly, yet with clear-sightedness. Their cry must not leave us unmoved.

3.2 To understand and comprehend the Church’s journey

In addition to the need for us to have a very good understanding of the youth situation, there is an even more urgent need for us to study and assimilate the journey that the Church has undertaken in recent decades and that continues today.

Genuine youth ministry must be guided by the teachings of the Church. It is important for us to be aware of the developments that have taken place over the past few decades.

I am referring in particular to four documents that should be read as a whole: *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, *Catechesi Tradendae*, *Redemptoris Missio* and the *General Catechetical Directory* (1997).

These documents of the Church throw light on the relationships that exist between culture and evangelisation, and also between evangelisation and catechesis. The *Directory*, right from the beginning, has interesting things to say about the *field of the world* and the *Church's role in the field of the world*.

The study of these documents leads us to a synthesis which has evolved during the past few decades and which gives us a crescendo of convergence. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* helps us to identify the vital points of an emerging culture and the possibilities this presents; *Catechesi Tradendae* emphasises the components of catechesis that does not get lost in relativism when it dialogues with cultures; *Redemptoris Missio* encourages us to understand the mission *ad gentes* within a religious framework that is complex and forever moving; finally, the *Directory* follows up the previous documents and gives a wide view of the challenges while pointing to ways to have solid catechesis in the processes of evangelisation.

3.3 New territory, languages and paradigms – the centrality of the human person

The Church continues to have the same concern it has always had, and that is to find modes and methods, ways and means through which to convey the good news to humanity. This concern for our vocation to evangelise appears in all these documents: “This question of ‘how to evangelize’ is permanently relevant, because the methods of evangelizing vary according to the different circumstances of time, place and culture, and because they thereby present a certain challenge to our capacity for discovery and adaptation” (*EN* no.40).

Church documents speak of an *original pedagogy of the faith* that should guide and animate our research as evangelisers: “it is natural that techniques perfected and tested for education in general should be adapted for the service of education in the faith... Pedagogy of faith is not a question of transmitting human knowledge, even of the highest kind; it is a question of communicating God's revelation in its entirety... A technique is of value in catechesis only to the extent that it serves the faith that is to be transmitted and learned; otherwise it is of no value” (*CT* no.58; see also *RM* no.37).

Therefore, **attention to the context and to the recipient** is a dimension that must not be disregarded. This topic is presented in the *Directory* as a synthesis that reinforces the idea already present in the preceding documents. In *Part Three* and *Part Four* we find, on the one hand, the essential procedures for teaching the faith in a way that is not confined to a purely intellectual viewpoint but that allows itself to be inspired by divine teaching methods. On the other hand, due attention is given to the different situations that exist and those aspects that concern the social-religious aspect, especially the issue of inculturation (cf. the *Preface* of the *Directory*; see also numbers 167ff.).

4. The integral pastoral experience that we should provide

Our efforts to build up our knowledge about evangelising action and to know about the Church's ongoing work in that area in its everyday activity and *traditio*, need to be completed with content

that is proper to the faith. Pope Paul VI spoke of a temptation that is never far away when he warned against *reductionism* and *ambiguity*. At that time **the risk of “horizontal” pastoral ministry** was already evident: “... are frequently tempted to reduce her mission to the dimensions of a simply temporal project. They would reduce her aims to a man-centered goal; [...] to material well-being. Her activity, forgetful of all spiritual and religious preoccupation, would become initiatives of the political or social order” (*EN* no.32).

4.1 Gradual processes for an integral presentation of a life of faith

A step-by-step journey does not take away from the wholeness of the content. In fact, it is part of the process both as goal and source. We are not helping young people if they see that we are afraid and are compromising. Young people are looking for mature educators and genuine evangelisers and we must not treat this requirement as being of little importance. Their desire for adult educators is an expression of the cry that comes from a heart longing for truth that seeks out a voice of prophecy.

The *Directory* gives us an excellent synthesis of the common elements that make up the process of evangelisation and express the deeply-felt expectations of young people:⁵

- it is motivated by *charity* which fills and transforms the whole temporal order and assumes and renews cultures;
- it is *testimony* among the peoples of the new way of being and living that is characteristic of Christians;
- it is the explicit proclamation of the Gospel by means of the “*first proclamation*” which is a call to conversion;
- it is initiation in the faith and Christian life by means of *catechesis* and the *sacraments of initiation* for those who are converted to Jesus Christ and those who return to the path as his followers, all being incorporated into the community of Christians;
- it is continual nourishment of the gift of *communion* among the faithful through ongoing education in the faith, sacraments and works of charity;
- it continuously stimulates *mission* and proclaims the Gospel in word and action throughout the world.⁶

We find in this process the elements that compose the path of faith: attention to culture and the value attached to giving witness; the path of personal conversion which is at the basis of the proclamation of the Gospel; the communion of believers as the outcome, and an experience of discipleship that opens up to the future of apostolic experience.

This process helps us to avoid the **pitfalls of either of the two extremes**. One of these is to look exclusively inwards, because the result of this can be detrimental **spiritual intimism**. The other is to look only at the horizontal plane and see the **anthropocentric and earthly dimension** as

⁵ “The Church, while ever containing in herself the fullness of the means of salvation, always operates ‘by slow stages’. The conciliar decree *Ad Gentes* clarifies well the dynamic of the process of evangelization: Christian witness, dialogue and presence in charity (11-12), the proclamation of the Gospel and the call to conversion (13), the catechumenate and Christian Initiation (14), the formation of the Christian communities through and by means of the sacraments and their ministers (15-18). (113) This is the dynamic for establishing and building up the Church” (*Directory* no.47).

⁶ Cf. *Directory* no.48.

the final goal.

When a genuine step-by-step approach is guided by the light of the fullness of faith, we have before us a path that meets the yearnings of human beings. It is a path that satisfies a thirst for the divine and goes on to reveal how fullness can only be found in Jesus Christ.

This process is clearly affirmative in the educational and cultural dimension, and in addition, it also creatively and realistically incorporates the evangelisation dimension, together with the provision of suitable catechesis that takes into account the circumstances of young people and adolescents. This process must necessarily include an opening up to the vocational aspect, one in which young people are helped to find their life plan. This important stage of their lives is thus sustained and supported by their experience of group, and this has become a true community of believers who hope and love.

4.2 Understanding the Church to be a ‘catholic’ experience

I shall return briefly to the ecclesial dimension which we mentioned at the beginning. We provide young people with a true experience of faith when they can feel the ‘catholic’ dimension.

When Pope Benedict XVI was speaking to the Roman Curia about the experience of World Youth Day (WYD) in Madrid 2011, he said that the major dimension of WYD is: “a new experience of catholicity, of the Church’s universality. This is what struck the young people and all the participants quite directly: we come from every continent, but although we have never met one another, we know one another. We speak different languages, we have different ways of life and different cultural backgrounds, yet we are immediately united as one great family. Outward separation and difference is relativised. We are all moved by the one Lord Jesus Christ, in whom true humanity and at the same time the face of God himself is revealed to us”.⁷

Today more than ever, this dimension of catholicity, or *sensus Ecclesiae*, should be more at the centre of our prayer, our pastoral experiences and our plans. The catholicity of the Church cannot be invented or improvised. It is part of the identity of the followers of Christ and it is sustained by a convinced life of faith – *lex credendi*, by the celebration of the Eucharist – *lex orandi*, and by a life that is noticeably joyful and is shared with others in apostolic charity – *lex vivendi*. These are the three pillars that the Fathers of the Church identified in their theological and pastoral writings.

We see that these include joy, and Pope Benedict XVI spoke of this in the same speech: “and so we have also understood quite concretely: despite all trials and times of darkness, it is a wonderful thing to belong to the worldwide Church, to the Catholic Church, that the Lord has given to us”.

4.3 Good experiences of Christian mystagogy

In addition to a step-by-step approach and to catholicity, I feel that we should not forget that young people may have more than a desire for faith. We should realise that quite a number of

⁷ BENEDICT XVI, Christmas greetings address to the Roman Curia, 22 December 2011.

them want to go a step further. They want a real inner experience of the beauty of faith.

We should not be afraid to take the evangelisation of youth beyond the line of basic knowledge of the faith. Rather than speak of “transmission”, we should speak of “initiation”. This requires an environment in which young people can be accompanied from where they are now and helped to develop fully as people and as Christians. This is possible only when we know how to provide a community environment that strengthens one’s identity and does not simply supply the comfort of belonging.

We need pastoral practice in which there are spaces and groups of people who are welcoming, where there is encouragement of basic experiences like silence, prayer, the Word of God, celebration of the sacraments as a source of spiritual growth, engagement in apostolic charity, and all those experiences that give great light to our lives.⁸

5. “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!”

Saint Paul said to the Corinthians: “For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! (*1Cor* 9:16). This is what the Church today wants us to discover. The exigency that Paul was speaking about is not an external imposition. It is the consequence of an inner discovery. It is the fruit of love and never the product of fear. The Good News, with its intrinsic association with beauty, today continues to exercise this marvellous power on the hearts of those who seek God.

5.1 A gift fearlessly shared

We are given a wonderful example of optimism by Pope Paul VI. At the end of the Holy Year of 1975, during his first general audience of the new year, the pope immediately suggested the basic lines for renewed evangelisation. His words at that time are amazingly contemporary and innovative for us today: “the awakening of our primary vocation is specific to the Church ever faithful and responsible. It is our mission to proclaim the Gospel all over the earth. Growing awareness of the spiritual and moral needs of the modern world give the subject of evangelisation a contemporary quality that seems to have brought the spiritual growth of the Holy Year to a successful conclusion. It has opened our eyes to see that **the world needs the Gospel**; that **the patrimony of doctrinal and pastoral wisdom from the recent Ecumenical Council is awaiting clear and coherent application**; that **personal awareness of the co-responsibility of every Catholic must alert us to the needs of our times**; that **the Church today is reaching out to the problems, controversies, hostilities and possible catastrophes in a society without God**, and through these the Church is experiencing the tensions of our dramatic times; the **discovery of unexpected evangelical possibilities in human souls** that are put to the test by the difficult and disappointing experiences of modern-day progress; and finally, some **secrets of divine mercy in which we see the impressive resources of God’s Kingdom**. All of this tells us that this is a **wonderful decisive time** in which we must live with eyes wide open and with fearless hearts. **Young people, at least those who are brighter and more courageous, understand this and place themselves at the vanguard. We must not be afraid to start again**

⁸ The part of the *Directory* that deals with youth and adolescents, nos. 181-185, contains a very detailed and sharp analysis of the youth situation and the difficulties and expectations, and also on the provision of specific activities that take the world of youth and adolescents into consideration.

from the beginning the complicated and exhausting mission of evangelisation”.⁹

5.2 The call to become apostles

In the above quotation, we find elements that reinforce our reflection. In the first place, the gift that we have received must be shared because “the world needs the Gospel”. The teachings of the Church have developed in this area in recent years, and it should be studied and put into action. It is a “patrimony of doctrinal and pastoral wisdom”, and we should act upon it knowing that it is a gift for humanity.

The life of every believer today is like that of Jesus’ first followers and like that of all those who choose to follow him tomorrow. The community of believers have a shared co-responsibility in relation to “the needs of our times; that the Church today is reaching out to the problems, controversies, hostilities and possible catastrophes in a society without God”.

The fact remains, and we too can see it today, that the Church always meets on its journey “unexpected evangelical possibilities in human souls”, because the Church continues to be sustained by “some secrets of divine mercy in which we see the impressive resources of God’s Kingdom”. It is true that we too can say “this is a wonderful decisive time in which we must live with eyes wide open and with fearless hearts”.

It is also encouraging to see how Paul VI refers to young people. He is almost entrusting to this great portion of humanity the gift of faith and the joyful responsibility of sharing it: “Young people, at least those who are brighter and more courageous, understand this and place themselves at the vanguard. We must not be afraid to start again from the beginning the complicated and exhausting mission of evangelisation”.

PART THREE

III. POPE BENEDICT XVI – PASTOR OF YOUNG PEOPLE

6. Benedict XVI’s methodology

I would like to complete this talk with an outline of the basic points that we could call the pastoral methodology used by Benedict XVI in dealing with young people. We can see a convergence not only with the main points to be found in the *Directory*, but also with the general approach used in the documents we referred to earlier.

Pope Benedict XVI speaks of the need for pastoral ministry that takes its starting point from a reading of the times. This reading should be serene and profound, and intelligent and respectful of human desire. It is with this anthropological perspective that is essentially open to the divine as the source of existence and a goal worthy of human dignity, that the pope points to a path that is as simple as it is great.

⁹ PAUL VI, General Audience, Wednesday 7 January 1976 [*our translation*].

Right from the start of his petrine ministry, Benedict XVI has clearly placed young people at the centre of his pastoral concern: “And so, today, with great strength and great conviction, on the basis of long personal experience of life, I say to you, dear young people: Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ – and you will find true life. Amen” (*Mass for the inauguration of the Pontificate, 24 April 2005*).

6.1 To communicate God in a world without God

If we are well acquainted with the present times, we see a scenario in which the sense of God is being eclipsed: “the great problem of the West is forgetfulness of God. This forgetfulness is spreading. In short, all the individual problems can be traced back to this question, I am sure of it” (*Address to members of the Roman Curia, 22 December 2006*).

Here we find the crux of various problems, and so we ask those questions that can open up a dialogue with this culture: “By ridding himself of God and not expecting salvation from him, man believes he can do as he pleases and that he can make himself the sole judge of himself and his actions. However, when man eliminates God from his horizon, declares God ‘dead’, is he really happy? Does he really become freer? When men proclaim themselves the absolute proprietors of themselves and the sole masters of creation, can they truly build a society where freedom, justice and peace prevail? Does it not happen instead – as the daily news amply illustrates – that arbitrary power, selfish interests, injustice and exploitation and violence in all its forms are extended? In the end, man reaches the point of finding himself lonelier and society is more divided and bewildered” (*Opening of the 12th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 5 October 2008*).

Whenever we present the faith to others, we must not allow ourselves to be conditioned, but we offer a way that can be followed: “On the other hand, wherever individuals and nations accept God’s presence, worship him in truth and listen to his voice, then the civilization of love is being built, a civilization in which the dignity of all is respected, and communion increases, with all its benefits” (*Message for the 26th World Youth Day 2011, 1.3*)

In this first point we see the pope’s keen observation of society with its shadows and darkness, and how he introduces the light of faith. There is nowhere, no matter how poor and wretched, where faith cannot enter. Its only motivation is to offer light and hope wherever these things are lacking.

6.2 The Church as a faithful company of friends

The Church, at this time in history, sets out like the pilgrims on the road to Emmaus. The pope’s words in France place emphasis on the pilgrim dimension of the Church: “My greatest concern is for young people. Some of them are struggling to find the right direction, or are suffering from a loss of connection with their families. Still others are experiencing the limits of religious communitarianism. Sometimes on the margins and often left to themselves, they are vulnerable and must come to terms on their own with a reality that often overwhelms them. It is necessary to offer them a sound educational environment and to encourage them to respect and assist others if they are to develop serenely towards the age of responsibility. The Church can offer her own specific contribution in this area” (*Apostolic visit to France, Meeting with authorities of State at the Elysée Palace in Paris, 12 September 2008*).

The Church today, as always, takes the same stand as did Saint Cyprian who left us a personal testimony in one of his autobiographical writings. The pope quoted this in one of his meetings with the clergy of Rome: *'I lived in this world of ours', he says, 'totally cut off from God because the divinities were dead and God was not visible. And in seeing Christians I thought: it is an impossible life, this cannot be done in our world! Then, however, meeting some of them, joining their company and letting myself be guided in the catechumenate, in this process of conversion to God, I gradually understood: it is possible! And now I am happy at having found life'*. (Then the Holy Father went on to say) "It seems to me to be very important that the young find people – both of their own age and older – in whom they can see that Christian life today is possible, and also reasonable and feasible" (*Meeting with the Clergy of the Rome Diocese, 22 February 2007*).

6.3 To accompany them like parents do

In this work of education, the educator and the pastoral education community are very important: "Especially today, when isolation and loneliness are a widespread condition to which noise and group conformity is no real remedy, personal guidance becomes essential, giving those who are growing up the assurance that they are loved, understood and listened to. In practice, this guidance must make tangible the fact that our faith is not something of the past, that it can be lived today and that in living it we really find our good. Thus, boys and girls and young people may be helped to free themselves from common prejudices and will realize that the Christian way of life is possible and reasonable, indeed, is by far the most reasonable" (*Address at the Convention of the Diocese of Rome, 11 June 2007*).

Accompanying young people in this process is not merely a technique. It is genuine sharing by a person who is witnessing to his/her faith: "This witness becomes a proper reference point to the extent that the person can account for the hope that nourishes his life (cf. *1Pt 3:15*) and is personally involved in the truth that he proposes. [...] the witness never refers to himself but to something, or rather, to Someone greater than he, whom he has encountered and whose dependable goodness he has sampled. Thus, every educator and witness finds an unequalled model in Jesus Christ, the Father's great witness, who said nothing about himself but spoke as the Father had taught him (cf. *Jn 8:28*)" (*Address at the Convention of the Diocese of Rome, 6 June 2005*).

Accompaniment of young people is strengthened by the wisdom of silent growth. When Benedict XVI was answering a question on the long-term benefits of WYD while he was on the flight to Madrid, he answered that: "God always sows in silence. The results are not immediately apparent in the statistics... we cannot say straight away that there will be an immense growth of the Church tomorrow. God does not act in this way. However, the Church grows in silence and vigorously. I know from other World Youth Days that a great many friendships were born, friendships for life; a great many experiences that God exists. And let us place trust in this silent growth, and we may be certain, even if the statistics do not tell us much, that the Lord's seed really grows and will be for very many people the beginning of a friendship with God and with others, of a universality of thought, of a common responsibility which really shows us that these days do bear fruit" (*Meeting with journalists during the flight to Madrid, 18 August 2011*).

6.4 Open up the way for the quest for truth

Dialogue with culture, the experience of the Church and accompaniment are the experiences and

conditions necessary in order to foster a meeting with the truth that makes people free and gives them happiness.

Here we come to one of the central themes of Pope Benedict XVI's ministry.

The quest for the truth is not an easy subject to understand, and even less so is the accompaniment of those following this quest. In a culture where the dominant idea is that everyone creates their own truth, with the consequent relativism, it is not easy to see how "experiences, detached from any consideration of what is good or true, can lead, not to genuine freedom, but to moral or intellectual confusion, to a lowering of standards, to a loss of self-respect, and even to despair" (*Welcoming celebration by the young people at the 23rd World Youth Day, Sydney, 17 July 2008*).

As this is the way things are, then the great challenge that youth ministry must take up is to really offer pastoral care of the mind. The pope says this clearly: "And you, dear priests and educators, do not hesitate to promote a true and proper 'pastoral care of the mind' – and more widely, of the person – that takes young people's questions seriously, both existential questions and those that arise from comparison with the forms of rationality widespread today, in order to help them find valid and pertinent Christian answers, and lastly, to make their own that decisive response which is Christ the Lord" (*Address at the Convention of the Diocese of Rome, 5 June 2005*).

Benedict XVI's address to young teachers in Madrid is still fresh in our minds: "we realize that we are a link in that chain of men and women committed to teaching the faith and making it credible to human reason. And we do this not simply by our teaching, but by the way we live our faith and embody it, just as the Word took flesh and dwelt among us. Young people need authentic teachers: persons open to the fullness of truth in the various branches of knowledge, persons who listen to and experience in their own hearts that interdisciplinary dialogue; persons who, above all, are convinced of our human capacity to advance along the path of truth. Youth is a privileged time for seeking and encountering truth. As Plato said: 'Seek truth while you are young, for if you do not, it will later escape your grasp' (*Parmenides*, 135d). This lofty aspiration is the most precious gift which you can give to your students, personally and by example. It is more important than mere technical know-how, or cold and purely functional data" (*Meeting with young university professors gathered in the Basilica de San Lorenzo de El Escorial, 19 August 2011*).

On this topic, we should recall the profound reflection given by the pope on the 150th anniversary of the death of the Holy Curé of Ars, Saint John Mary Vianney, when he said: "contemporary society is facing challenges that are just as demanding and may have become even more complex. If in his time the 'dictatorship of rationalism' existed, in the current epoch a sort of 'dictatorship of relativism' is evident in many contexts. Both seem inadequate responses to the human being's justifiable request to use his reason as a distinctive and constitutive element of his own identity. Rationalism was inadequate because it failed to take into account human limitations and claims to make reason alone the criterion of all things, transforming it into a goddess; contemporary relativism humiliates reason because it arrives de facto at affirming that the human being can know nothing with certainty outside the positive scientific field. Today however, as in that time, man, 'a beggar for meaning and fulfilment', is constantly in quest of exhaustive answers to the basic questions that he never ceases to ask himself" (*Audience, Wednesday 5 August 2009*).

6.5 To show the way of charity

Truth and charity journey together on the same road. In the encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI gives some clear ideas on the relationship that exists between truth and charity: “Through this close link with truth, charity can be recognized as an authentic expression of humanity and as an element of fundamental importance in human relations, including those of a public nature. *Only in truth does charity shine forth*, only in truth can charity be authentically lived. Truth is the light that gives meaning and value to charity. That light is both the light of reason and the light of faith, through which the intellect attains to the natural and supernatural truth of charity: it grasps its meaning as gift, acceptance, and communion. **Without truth, charity degenerates into sentimentality. Love becomes an empty shell, to be filled in an arbitrary way. In a culture without truth, this is the fatal risk facing love.** It falls prey to contingent subjective emotions and opinions, the word “love” is abused and distorted, to the point where it comes to mean the opposite. Truth frees charity from the constraints of an **emotionalism** that deprives it of relational and social content, and of a **fideism** that deprives it of human and universal breathing-space. In the truth, charity reflects the personal yet public dimension of faith in the God of the Bible, who is both *Agápe* and *Lógos*: Charity and Truth, Love and Word” (CV no.3).

I think that it is very important for educators of youth to be aware of the essential connection between the two. If not, we risk falling into the trap of one or other of the extremes that the pope named as emotionalism and fideism.

When there is charity, which is the love seen when people engage in options aimed towards the common good, this is not because of any ideology. The underlying idea of today’s culture on the one hand “puts God in parentheses and ... discourages every really committed choice and especially definitive choices”. On the other hand, it tends to “privilege instead, in the various milieus of life, the affirmation of self and immediate satisfactions” (*Address to the General Assembly of the Italian Episcopal Conference, 29 May 2008*).

In a cultural context of relativism, where the self is the measure of all things, “sooner or later, every person is in fact condemned to doubting in the goodness of his or her own life and the relationships of which it consists, the validity of his or her commitment to build with others something in common” (*Address at the Convention of the Diocese of Rome, 5 June 2005*).

That which was thought to be the condition for total and absolute freedom, ends up by being a path to desperation and nothingness. That is why there is so much fear of saying “yes” forever, fear of unconditional commitment.

It is only with a path of guaranteed acceptance and accompaniment that we can offer young people the truth that leads to charity, reasoning that leads to love – love received in order to be shared: “When they feel that their freedom is respected and taken seriously, adolescents and young people, despite their changeability and frailty, are not in fact unwilling to let themselves be challenged by demanding proposals: indeed, they often feel attracted and fascinated by them. They also wish to show their generosity in adhering to the great, perennial values that constitute life’s foundations” (*Address at the Convention of the Diocese of Rome, 11 June 2007*).

These words are true, and we can attest to that, all of us who have had pastoral and educational experience with adolescents and youth who have touched the depths of human misery. Yet, their eyes open wide when they see that a person respects them for who they are and really tries in an authentic and honest way to help them become the people that they can be.

It is not possible here to spend more time on this stage of the education of youth, but I would like to say that Benedict XVI has shown himself to be a true teacher and educator of young people.

6.6 WYD as a cenacle of Catholicism

In his analysis of WYD in Madrid 2011, a speech that I cited above, Benedict XVI presented five points that synthesise the Madrid experience. These five points can help us all to see how these dimensions are present in our youth ministry and pastoral plans.

The pope spoke of a “new experience of **catholicity**, of the Church’s universality” which does not result in mere sterile emotivity but is expressed in a real and tangible way: “This is what struck the young people and all the participants quite directly: we come from every continent, but although we have never met one another, we know one another. We speak different languages, we have different ways of life and different cultural backgrounds, yet we are immediately united as one great family. Outward separation and difference is relativised. We are all moved by the one Lord Jesus Christ, in whom true humanity and at the same time the face of God himself is revealed to us”.

This “catholicity” becomes a gift to relish and an experience to live and also to transmit. It is to be in communion with everyone because it is the Lord Jesus who calls us, gathers us, meets with us and sends us forth.

The second point is **happiness**: “At the end of the day, these young people were visibly and tangibly filled with a great sense of happiness: the time that they gave up had meaning; in giving of their time and labour, they had found time, they had found life. And here something fundamental became clear to me: these young people had given a part of their lives in faith, not because it was asked of them, not in order to attain Heaven, nor in order to escape the danger of Hell. They did not do it in order to find fulfilment... But here it was not a matter of seeking fulfilment or wanting to live one’s life for oneself. These young people did good, even at a cost, even if it demanded sacrifice, simply because it is a wonderful thing to do good, to be there for others. All it needs is the courage to make the leap. Prior to all of this is the encounter with Jesus Christ, inflaming us with love for God and for others, and freeing us from seeking our own ego”.

True happiness is the fruit of love. It is not fleeting pleasure that comes from a good experience. It is like the meeting with Jesus on the road to Emmaus. At a certain point, the order as we know it has changed. Old ways of thinking are turned upside down and the mind and heart are opened up to what was formerly thought of as unthinkable and unattainable.

The third and fourth points made by Pope Benedict XVI are at the core of true catholicity and the source of true happiness: “A third element, that has an increasingly natural and central place in World Youth Days and in the spirituality that arises from them, is **adoration**. I still look back to that unforgettable moment during my visit to the United Kingdom, when tens of thousands of predominantly young people in Hyde Park responded in eloquent silence to the Lord’s sacramental presence, in adoration... Adoration is primarily an act of faith – the act of faith as such. God is not just some possible or impossible hypothesis concerning the origin of all things. He is present. And if he is present, then I bow down before him. Then my intellect and will and heart open up towards him and from him”.

Together with adoration the pope places the sacrament of reconciliation: “A further important

element of World Youth Days is the **sacrament of Confession**, which is increasingly coming to be seen as an integral part of the experience. Here we recognize that we need forgiveness over and over again, and that forgiveness brings responsibility. Openness to love is present in man, implanted in him by the Creator, together with the capacity to respond to God in faith”.

These are the two pillars of true education in the faith – the Eucharist and reconciliation. Today more than ever – and many of you may be surprised to hear this –, young people are not afraid of silence, and they are not ashamed to admit that they are in need of forgiveness and the freedom that this gives. We must ask ourselves if we educators sometimes lack the courage and fortitude to offer these two sources of joy and life to our young people.

As a fifth and final point, Pope Benedict XVI spoke of **joy** as being the fruit of “many factors at work here. But in my view, the crucial one is this certainty, based on faith: I am wanted; I have a task in history; I am accepted, I am loved... man can only accept himself if he is accepted by another. He needs the other’s presence, saying to him, with more than words: it is good that you exist. Only from the You can the I come into itself. Only if it is accepted, can it accept itself. Those who are unloved cannot even love themselves. This sense of being accepted comes in the first instance from other human beings. But all human acceptance is fragile. Ultimately we need a sense of being accepted unconditionally. Only if God accepts me, and I become convinced of this, do I know definitively: it is good that I exist. It is good to be a human being... Faith makes one happy from deep within. That is one of the wonderful experiences of World Youth Days”.

Joy is the fruit of a process of dialogue, illuminated by truth, lived in charity and sustained by people who know how to accompany. It is also the joy of discovering that we are loved and therefore capable of loving. This joy does not come from a closed horizontal experience, but rather from the discovery that each individual is created through love, redeemed through love that became flesh, and made holy in charity and truth.