

Cardinal Stanisław Ryłko
President
Pontifical Council for the Laity
Vatican City

FOURTH EUROPEAN MEETING ON YOUTH MINISTRY

*“A young Church witnessing
to the joy of the Gospel”*

MASS

Rome, 11 December 2014

Greeting and introduction

With this Mass we conclude the first stage of our European Meeting on Youth Ministry. It was a very productive day, and as it draws to a close, our hearts are filled with gratitude. We bring to the altar of the Lord the fruits of our work, the talks that we have heard, the lively discussion and exchange of experiences in the groups... All here who are leaders in youth ministry for the European bishops' conferences should find that all that happened today has rekindled the “delightful and comforting joy of evangelising” the younger generations of our continent. Pope Francis, the successor of Peter, asks for this...

Let us prepare our hearts to meet the Lord in his word and in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood through an act of sincere repentance for our sins:

** Lord, you are the defender of the poor – have mercy on us...*

** Christ, you are the refuge of the weak – have mercy on us...*

** Lord, you are the hope of sinners – have mercy on us...*

May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins and bring us to everlasting life. Amen.

The soul of youth ministry – a prophetic concern...

1. In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah uses dramatic tones to describe the situation of humanity waiting in expectation for the Messiah: “The poor and needy search for water, but there is none; their tongues are parched with thirst” (*Is* 41:17). To what thirst is he referring? It certainly is not thirst for drinking water. It is a deeper thirst, a thirst of the soul, a thirst for the Messiah, a thirst for God. Is this not also a portrait of the younger generations in the Europe of our times? They have a huge thirst to find meaning in life, hope for the future and faith. Today's young people have a great thirst for God. The talks we have heard today spoke of how many young people today are lost and confused, and this makes them easy prey to the world of crime and of destructive addictions (drugs, sex). There are so many young people who see no future because they cannot find employment. So many young people are “discarded” and regarded by the world as “useless”. The newspapers speak of an entire “lost generation”.

The Church cannot be unmoved by the cry of young people today: “We are thirsty! We are dying of thirst! Church, where are you?” God is surely not deaf to our cry. In Isaiah’s prophecy God says: “But I the Lord will answer them; I /.../ will not forsake them. I will make rivers flow on barren heights, and springs within the valleys. I will turn the desert into pools of water...” (*Is* 41, 17-18). This is a word of hope, a word of great encouragement for all of us involved in youth ministry. God does not abandon us. God always leads the way. God can write straight with crooked lines.

Pope Francis dreams of a Church that is constantly “going forth” on an “exodus” towards the existential peripheries where young people live. He does not want the Church to be enclosed in the narrow precincts of parish communities and pastoral groups. The Church must always look beyond... He wants the Church to be energised with courage to go further and further and never to stop. The Church should be like the Good Samaritan and bend down with motherly love to bind the wounds of the young. He has said so many times, “I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security” (*EG* no. 49). During this Congress, let us take this perspective of “exodus” and widen our gaze to see young people that we may never find in our churches or groups. They are also “ours”. Let us honestly ask ourselves what we do for them. We must reawaken and develop our spiritual desire to be close to the lives of young people, especially those who are far away.

2. Let us try to identify how a youth pastoral worker should be in our times. The liturgy of the word in today’s Mass can help us in this. It presents the figure of Saint John the Baptist – the last and the greatest of the prophets. The liturgy invites us to think about our pastoral work with young people as a prophetic mission. I feel

that this is a very important characteristic. Let us briefly look at the essential traits of a prophet.

A prophet lives and operates as a “*decentralised*” person – an expression much used by Pope Francis. It is God who is at the centre of their lives rather than their own selves. Prophets are energised by a great passion for God’s cause. John the Baptist liked to say, “[Christ] must become greater; I must become less” (*Jn* 3:30). This is a lesson in humility that we all need: “We are unworthy servants” (*Lk* 17:10). This is really recognition of the principle of the “primacy of grace”. This approach gives us strength and courage when faced with the challenges of our times. At the same time it protects us from the risk – so common among pastors – of a certain “pastoral narcissism”, an inflated quest for oneself and for self-glory rather than for God’s glory. Pastors who concentrate on themselves are harming God’s cause. They are not building – or rather, they are building on sand.

Prophets must have the courage to be *signs of contradiction* in the world when God calls them to proclaim uncomfortable truths that go against the dictates of the dominant culture and current politically correct thought. Prophets should not seek easy popularity and applause at all costs. They must always proclaim and defend the truth. This is an important reminder for all who work in youth ministry. They must have the courage to tell young people about the high demanding goals of the Gospel. Let us not forget that young people like challenges. Saint John Paul II used to say, “I am a friend of young people, but a demanding friend”. Pope Francis speaks of the need to reawaken young people’s “magnanimity”, their awareness that God created us for great things and not small things. To serve the truth – together with an approach of pastoral charity – is a basic act of mercy that is at the heart of the Gospel. In our times that are marked by a profound anthropological crisis, a crisis in values and, consequently, by a worrying crisis in education, those who are spiritual guides and educators are asked to reawaken the soul and courage of the prophets in their hearts.

Now we come to the third hallmark of a prophet: *restlessness of heart*. Prophets are restless people. They never stop. While others are contently sitting back, prophets are looking into the distance searching for new roads. They are urged forward by God and are constantly “in motion”. They often disturb the people near them and are likely to be annoying or even to make enemies. This is how it was in the Old Testament and this is how it is today. Prophets keep looking for new ways to convey the message that God has entrusted to them. It is precisely this that Pope Francis asks of us Christians and especially of pastors in this new season of evangelisation of the Church that is characterised by joy. I feel that the main purpose of our Meeting is to be a “healthy provocation” to reawaken in each of us a missionary restlessness, for this is at the heart of every pastoral activity in the Church. I conclude with words by Pope Francis: “Let us keep marching forward; let us give him everything, allowing him to make our efforts bear fruit in his good time” (EG n. 279).