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10th INTERNATIONAL YOUTH FORUM

“Learning to Love”

Rocca di Papa, 24-28 March 2010

Holy Mass

24 March 2010

Words of introduction

We bring to the Lord in this Eucharistic celebration the fruits of all we have done so far on this first day of the 10th International Youth Forum. We have come to the Forum to learn to love in the school of our Teacher, Jesus Christ. The sacrament of the Eucharist is a living memorial of the love “to the end” with which Jesus loved us by giving his life on the Cross, and it is the foremost lesson on how a Christian should love. In every Eucharistic celebration, Jesus says to us again and again: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends” (*Jn 15: 13-14*).

As we enter into the mystery of the love of Christ who is present in this Eucharist, let us therefore prepare ourselves through an act of deep repentance for our sins, especially for the sin of selfishness that closes us off from others and makes us incapable of giving love:

** Lord, you came, not come to condemn, but to forgive: have mercy on us.*

** Christ, you prepare a feast for every repentant sinner: have mercy on us.*

** Lord, you forgive much of those who love much: have mercy on us.*

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

Homily

God’s love, a challenge to be accepted

The first reading, taken from the book of Daniel, tells the beautiful story of three young Israelites who took their faith in the one God very seriously. The words: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (*Deut 6: 4-5*), were not empty words for them. They became an issue of life or death. They had the courage to say “no” to the king who constrained his subjects, under pain of death, to prostrate themselves

before idols and to adore the golden statue that he had erected. They said: “But it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up” (*Dan 3: 18*). They acted in accordance with their faith even though the penalty would be to be thrown into a burning furnace. However, God rewards the steadfast faith of those who trust in Him. The story of the three Israelite youths prompts us to think about what idolatry means. What is idolatry? What are idols? Human beings have always had the temptation to prostrate themselves before the work of their own hands and to worship it. This was a very serious sin for the Israelites. It was compared to adultery and betrayal. Why was this? It is because in Sacred Scripture the relationship between God and his people is symbolised as a relationship of spousal love. God loves Israel, his people, as a husband loves his wife. In the encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI explains that the word that best expresses God’s love for his people is the Greek term *agape*. This word means fidelity, gratuity, extreme generosity and self-giving. He goes further. This love can also be defined as *eros*, because God loves personally and loves us gratuitously, passionately and protectively. God’s love demands a response that is total and without reserve “with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your strength”. The Bible says: “for you shall worship no other god, because the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God” (*Exod 34: 14*). The revelation of God’s spousal love for his people reached its summit in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God who died on the Cross and rose again for us. This is how much God loves us: “to the end” (*Jn 13: 1*). This is the measure asked of our personal response. God’s love places concrete demands, and the first of these is that it is impossible to “serve two masters” (*Mt 6: 24*). To use biblical language, the one who serves two masters is an adulterer. Idolatry, therefore, is a betrayal, a deep wound inflicted by human beings on God’s love for them. Perhaps some of you feel that idolatry is a word from the remote past. In our times of such immense progress in science and technology and also of such extreme and blind rationalism, idolatry might seem to be a gross anachronism. However, this not so. In our world which is proud of its epochal achievements and wants to eliminate God from the scene of people’s lives, there are many varied forms of idolatry. Our world is full of idols that are called power, success, career, pleasure, money, sex, and the worship of our own bodies. These are the false gods before which the people of our times are prostrating themselves. Just like the idols of all times, they portend an illusory world, they do not keep their seductive false promises of happiness, they makes us slaves and they take over our lives in exchange for bitter emptiness and wounds that are difficult to heal.

In his splendid book *Jesus of Nazareth*, Benedict XVI responds to an essential question: what is the most important thing that Christ brought to us? The answer is that Jesus brought God to us. It is only by looking at the face of Jesus that we can know God and understand how much God loves us. It is only in this way that we can know who we are, God’s creatures, and what our true vocation and destiny may be. This is the meaning of Jesus’ words: “you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (*Jn 8: 32*). The truth is Jesus, and freedom is Jesus!

You cannot serve God and mammon (cf *Mt 6: 24*), the Lord reminds us. This means that faith in the true God is incompatible with all forms of idolatry. It cannot be accommodated to the idols in our lives. We must be careful and note which side we are on. Are we really on God’s side? We have to choose. Our choice is to restore to God and

his love for us the place it deserves in our lives: the centre. Very often this will not be painless, but it is a necessary condition if our existence is to find its ultimate meaning. The space in the human heart is infinite, and only the love of God can fill it. As Saint Augustine said: “for You have formed us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in You” (*Confessions*).

Idols obliterate the dignity of human beings. They relegate them to the status of servants and lead them towards death. Only the true God, by allowing us to enter into the space of his infinite love, can restore our dignity and true freedom, the freedom of God’s children that “is found only in the self-surrender which is part of the mystery of love” (Benedict XVI, 20.4.2008). I really hope that each of you present at the Forum which is just beginning will find it to be a time of joyful rediscovery of the love of God, the Father who looks upon each of his children individually. May it be a stimulus to put this love at the centre of your lives and to make it the deciding criterion of the choices you make each day.