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# The World Youth Day generation

I would like first of all to thank the organizers of this conference, i.e. the Jagiellonian University of Kraków and the Pontifical University of John Paul II, for taking up this topic in the context of the preparations for the next World Youth Days in Kraków. I speak as the President of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, that is, the office of the Vatican, which the Holy Father John Paul II entrusted the task of organizing the subsequent editions of the world meetings of youth with the Successor of Saint Peter. What I am going to say will be predominantly a sort of witness evidence of the birth of a new generation of young people in the Church, the “generation of World Youth Days.”

Let us begin with a question: What meaning did young people have for John Paul II? On the inauguration day of his pontificate he said to youth: “You are the future of the world, the hope for the Church! You are my hope...” This confession won their hearts from the very first moment. We know today that these words were not just empty rhetoric. They conveyed a substantial and long-term evangelization program for the young generation, to which the Holy Father remained faithful throughout

his entire pontificate. John Paul II perceived youth as “the fundamental and at the same time the daily way of the Church.”<sup>1</sup> He had a very sophisticated concept of youth, which he tried to convey and infuse into the young: “You are the youth of the nations and societies, youth of every family and of all humanity; you are also the youth of the Church [...] So your youth is not just your own property, your personal property or the property of a generation [...], at the same time it is a special possession belonging to everyone. It is a possession of humanity itself [...], a special treasure of man, of a young man or woman...”<sup>2</sup> It is a source of a great responsibility of how to manage this treasure in order not to waste it. In this context, John Paul II showed a deep interrelationship between youth and the Church: “The Church looks to the young; or rather, the Church in a special way sees herself in the young – in you as a group and in each of you as individuals.”<sup>3</sup> He said: “We need the enthusiasm of the young. We need their *joie de vivre*.”<sup>4</sup> The pontiff’s image of the young generation was absolutely positive: “...there is, in fact, an immense potential for good and for creative possibility.”<sup>5</sup> For him it was a fundamental starting point to the dialogue with youth. He trusted the young and focused on them in his apostolic mission... In them he saw his allies and partners in the project of new evangelization, as when the young seek God, they seek the sense of life, they seek the ultimate answers to the question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Lk 10:25). John Paul II wanted to make sure that in this search they could not fail to meet the Church. And the Church could not fail to meet youth.<sup>6</sup> It was his fundamental concern, as he said: “In my heart I carry a great concern. A great, enormous concern. I am deeply concerned, my dear young people, about you. Because tomorrow depends on you.”<sup>7</sup> It is exactly this concern in the pontiff’s heart that gave birth to World Youth Days, in which the extraordinary

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1 Apostolic Letter *Dilecti Amici* to the Youth of the World, 1985, 1.

2 Apostolic Letter *Dilecti Amici*..., 1, 3.

3 Apostolic Letter *Dilecti Amici*..., 15.

4 John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, ed. V. Messori, New York 1994, p. 125.

5 John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold*..., p. 124.

6 Cf. John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold*..., p. 126.

7 John Paul II, Meditations during the *Jasna Góra Appeal* with youth, 18.06.1983.

charisma of John Paul II, a friend of youth, found its absolute and global dimension.

The establishment of World Youth Days in the Church was preceded by two mass gatherings of the young with John Paul II in Rome: the International Jubilee for the Young on Palm Sunday of 1984, the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Redemption, and in the following year, also on Palm Sunday on the occasion of the International Youth Year (IYY) of 1985 proclaimed by the United Nations. The response of the young to the Holy Father's invitation was a massive inflow of pilgrims, which surprised everyone (on each occasion Rome was visited by more than 300 thousand young people from all over the world!). It was definitely a meaningful symbol clearly indicating that after the turbulent 1960s and 1970s something new was born in the world of the young: some kind of a thorough change of attitudes to life, faith and the Church. John Paul II, always so sensitive to the signs of the times, had immediately felt this very moment and instantaneously made a decision to launch the initiative of World Youth Days in the Church, which he announced in December 1985. In that time, nobody could even predict how "revolutionary" this decision would very soon become. The decision was motivated by the pontiff in the following way: "All young people should feel that the Church cares for them. That is why the whole Church all over the world, united with the Successor of Peter, must engage even more with youth, connecting with their anxieties and cares, their eagerness and hopes. We must reach out and respond to their expectations by communicating the certainty that is Christ, the Truth that is Christ, the love that is Christ, and to do so through proper instruction – the necessary and contemporary way of evangelization."<sup>8</sup> Since that moment, by the decision of the pontiff, the World Youth Day has been customarily celebrated in the Church on Palm Sunday (or another term decided by the bishops), and every two or three years, there have been world meetings of youth with the participation of the Holy Father in locations selected by him (so far World Youth Days have been held in 13 cities:

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<sup>8</sup> John Paul II, Address to the College Cardinals, the Curia and the Roman Prelature, 20.12.1985.

Buenos Aires, Santiago de Compostela, Częstochowa, Denver, Manila, Paris, Rome, Toronto, Cologne, Sidney, Madrid, Rio de Janeiro, and the forthcoming one in Kraków). Every year the Holy Father decides about the theme of a given meeting, which is thoroughly explained in a special address to the young. After years, going back in memories to the very beginnings, John Paul II admitted: “No one invented World Youth Days. It was the young people themselves that created them. Those Days, those encounters, then become something desired by young people throughout the world. Most of the time, these Days were something of a surprise for priests, and even bishops, in that they surpassed all their expectations.” The pontiff also explained: “It is not true that the pope brings the young from one end of the world to the other. It is they who bring him. Even though he is getting older, they urge him to be young, they do not permit him to forget his experience, his discovery of youth and its great importance for the life of every man. I believe this explains a great deal.”<sup>9</sup>

Since the very beginning, World Youth Days have conveyed an extraordinarily important message for the Church and for the world. In the times when young people were perceived with distrust and suspicion (after the experience of turbulent 1960s and 1970s), John Paul II had courage to concentrate on them. He was not afraid of the young, he searched for them, he eagerly spent time with them and talked to them... In the context of the contemporary laicized culture, which aims at eliminating God and faith from public life, restricting it to a narrow circle of privacy, the Holy Father had courage to adopt the strategy of organizing large gatherings of youth (reaching as much as three or even four million participants, as for instance in Manila or Rio de Janeiro!). For the young, it is an exceptionally suggestive experience of the universality of the Church and a global dimension of faith in Jesus Christ, which provides a deep feeling of the community in faith (“I am not alone!...”), i.e. an understanding that young people need so much these days... Finally, in the epoch when young people tend to be flattered whereas the generation of adults does not have enough courage

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<sup>9</sup> John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold...*, p. 125.



to demand from youth, John Paul II appeared as a “demanding friend”... In the very center of World Youth Days, he placed the Cross of the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of 1984. On this occasion the pontiff addressed youth in the following words: “Dear young people, on closing the Holy Year, I entrust to you the sign of this Jubilee Year: the Cross of Christ! Take it around the world as a sign of the love of the Lord Jesus for humanity and proclaim to all that only in Christ dead and risen there is salvation and redemption.”<sup>10</sup> The Holy Year Cross toured across the world together with youth. Its power of attracting the young people, who wanted to touch it, is extraordinary on all the continents. In a way, the Jubilee Cross has become a kind of a “plough” preparing the soil of young souls for the evangelical “sowing” of World Youth Days. John Paul II was never afraid of making young people face the mystery of the Cross and the radical demands of the Gospel. He addressed youth in a straightforward way: “Christ is demanding with his disciples, and the Church does not hesitate to repropose His Gospel to you ‘without shortcuts.’ Those who are taught by the Divine Master lovingly embrace His Cross, which leads to the fullness of life and happiness. Is it not the Cross which for 15 years now has led the pilgrimage of young people on the occasion of World Youth Days?”<sup>11</sup>

Undoubtedly, establishing World Youth Days was one of the most prophetic decisions of Saint John Paul II and nowadays the Church still benefits from its fruit. This way, the pontiff gave rise to an exceptional adventure of faith, which embraced millions of young people worldwide. The meetings of youth with the Successor of Saint Peter have now lasted for exactly three decades and their history presents an adequate record of their spiritual fruit. For many young people WYDs were the moments of deep internal transformations or even authentic conversions; the moments of a true meeting with Jesus Christ – the Way, the Truth and the Life; the moments of discovering in Christ a true Friend and Companion on the way; the moments of discovering the Church as a youth-friendly community, the Church that listens to them and

<sup>10</sup> John Paul II, Easter Sunday, Rome, 22.04.1984.

<sup>11</sup> John Paul II, *Angelus*, Rome, 1.04.1984.

understands their problems; and also the moments of discovering the Successor of Saint Peter as a guide and a trustworthy friend... For many young people, World Youth Days have become the genuine “laboratories of faith” (John Paul II) and the place of discovering faith tailored to their youth needs: a young, enthusiastic and joyful faith... And how many decisions of life vocations matured in the course of WYDs! How many decisions about choosing priesthood, monastic life or Christian marriage! Someone wrote that in the world of the young people we are currently witnessing a kind of a “quiet revolution” powered exactly by World Youth Days. Beyond any doubt, owing to those meetings, on the threshold of the third millennium of Christianity, the Church revealed its young image to the world, full of enthusiasm and joy of faith. A 30-year-old history of World Youth Days is a story of the birth of a new generation of young people – the generation of World Youth Days... They are young people who have chosen Jesus Christ and, despite their weaknesses, they are determined to go through their lives together with Him; they are young people who are not ashamed of belonging to the Church, they trust the Church and let Her lead them... John Paul II used to call them the “guardians of the morning” or “the People of Beatitudes;” Pope Benedict XVI referred to them as the “Prophets of a New Era,” and Pope Francis compared them to a living “field of faith” (*campus fidei*)!

Each edition of World Youth Days, as it has been already said, reveals a new and unexpected image of both the Church and youth, hence the meetings produce such a large interest, they surprise and raise many questions... WYDs are, in a way, a photograph of a young generation, which differs seriously from what we are shown in the mass media on a daily basis. WYDs present young people craving for true values and seeking a deeper sense of their own existence. Disillusioned by the mirages of old and new ideologies and offers from fake masters, promising them happiness at a low price, the young are seeking ambitious answers to fundamental questions of human existence and they are searching for them in Jesus Christ and in the Church. World Youth Days have become a powerful medium of evangelization and dialog of the Church with the young generation, according to the words of John Paul II: “The Church has so much to talk about with youth, and youth have so much to share

with the Church.”<sup>12</sup> Each WYD is a feast of young faith, a revelation of the Church, which remains young for the young. The event is a revelation of the Church with an amazing power of attracting the young generation. World Youth Days are a magnificent spiritual heritage of Saint John Paul II, they are the gift of the Holy Spirit for the entire Church and a majestic symbol of hope for the whole world. WYDs are a great gift and, at the same time, an enormous challenge...

A marvelous faith adventure of youth from all over the world led by the Successor of Saint Peter has been lasting for decades and still brings invaluable fruit in their lives. New popes have come – Benedict XVI and now Pope Francis, but World Youth Days still fascinate and attract the young. Poland was privileged to host WYD of 1991 at Jasna Góra, which entered history as the first meeting of youth from Eastern and Western Europe after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. And now, after 25 years, the event returns to Poland. How much has Poland changed and how much has the Church changed in this country! But first of all, how much have the Polish youth changed! Totally new challenges and tasks have appeared, which demand proper pastoral answers. Each World Youth Day, as Pope Benedict XVI used to say, is a “salutary provocation” for the Church, as it forces Her to seek new ways of reaching the young generation. New generation of youth, born from World Youth Days, need a new generation of priests sensitive to the signs of the times, and first of all, the priests, who will occur to be authentic witnesses of Jesus Christ and His Gospel. Each WYD is not only a test on solving logistic problems but primarily on the ability of giving a creative pastoral response to the needs of the young...

Pope Francis invited young people from all corners of the world to Kraków, the world capital of the Divine Mercy, to experience and celebrate their jubilee under the auspices of two great Apostles of Divine Mercy: Saint John Paul II and Saint Faustina. The interest and expectations of youth in relation to this event are enormous. The Organizing Committee in Kraków, supported by numerous volunteers from all over the world, are doing a gigantic work and we are all extremely grateful for it. Together

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<sup>12</sup> John Paul II, Apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, 46.

we are doing our best to face this enormous task, keeping in mind the words of the psalmist: “Except the Lord build a house, they labor in vain that build it...” (Ps 127). The Architect and the main Host of World Youth Days is Jesus Christ Himself! He always has the last word... This fundamental truth helps us to look forward to the future with hope...