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John Paul II's World Youth Day proposal: freedom nobly lived

It is a tremendous honor and privilege to be here with you today in Pope St. John Paul II's city. For someone who is virtually a "card-carrying" member of the JP II generation, there is no better way to pay respect to this saintly man and his vision for youth. This occasion also comes on a special anniversary for me, as it was exactly twenty years ago that I was baptized, confirmed and received my first Holy Communion from John Paul II during the Easter Vigil mass in St. Peter's Basilica. Perhaps some of you were even there!

I was additionally blessed to start working for the Holy See just over one year after my reception into the Church, no doubt due to the previous formation I'd received from Polish Benedictine nuns at St. Mary's Queen of Angels school in Swartz Creek, Michigan. I was first sent to the Holy See Mission to the United Nations in New York, and two years later, to the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in Rome, where I worked for 5 years before joining the Acton Institute's office in Rome.

I cannot adequately express to you the admiration so many people of my generation have for JP II. He along with Ronald Reagan and Margaret

Thatcher were my childhood heroes, and these three helped bring down the Berlin Wall and end Soviet communism. If you haven't read John O'Sullivan's *The President, the Pope and the Prime Minister: Three Who Changed the World*, which I know has been published in Polish and Italian, I strongly urge you to do so, as it wonderfully captures the long odds each of them faced in rising to their positions of leadership and just how remarkable we were to have three such figures in our presence at such a crucial juncture in world history. In fact, they were remarkable precisely because they refused to simply give in to the tide of History with a capital "H" and turned out to shape it instead.

Besides my lifelong admiration for JP II, I also attended two World Youth Days, in Rome for the Jubilee Year of 2000 and in Toronto, where I'd been studying when I was received into the Church, in 2002. Even though as a 30-year-old I really didn't consider myself one of the "youth," I greatly enjoyed and profited from those gatherings where I met so many others of the JP II generation, which soon came to be called the "Catholic mafia" in places like Washington, New York and Rome.

But World Youth Day was much more than a party or a good time among friends. As the biographer George Weigel put it, young people loved JP II because he challenged them and didn't pander to them like so many other adults tend to do. He felt at home among the young, but also knew that he had to give them something of himself to launch them "into the deep" (*duc in altum*) at Christ's command. God only knows how many vocations to the priesthood, religious and consecrated life, and marriage came out of World Youth Days.

What are the contents of this noble message JP II had for youth? That each one of us is created for a starring role in the great human and spiritual drama of our lives; that we do not cease to be protagonists just because God is the author. We are not mere playthings of divine will, but were created to be free and responsible persons who find themselves through self-giving to others.

Free and responsible – how beautiful but also demanding this combination is. Too many people, and not only the young, want to be free without responsibility, having everything provided for them by someone else. This "entitlement mentality" is excusable in infants whose wills know

no bounds, but it's merely childish in others. And of course, we always want other people to be responsible in their dealings with us, even if this means limiting their freedom and closing ourselves off from them. True Christians ought to be tough on ourselves and indulgent with others, but we are much too often the opposite – self-indulgent and harsh towards others. What pieces of work we can be!

I think John Paul II instinctively knew what human beings are like in all their splendor and misery. That's why his greatest gift to youth may have been his deep awareness of what makes for true freedom. Here I will mention just three aspects of his teaching that remain vitally important today: 1) the relationship between freedom and truth, 2) the importance of culture, and 3) economic freedom and the creative spirit.

Some forms of modern freedom are based on the false idea that there is no such thing as **the** truth; there's only your truth and my truth. Given our self-regard, we don't want to accept that someone else may actually be closer to the truth than we are, that someone may actually be authoritative, closer to understanding and living the truth of all things, as St. Thomas puts it. It's no accident that JPII's great encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*, begins with the parable of the rich young man who asked Our Lord, "What good must I do to have eternal life?" The moral life, starting with the keeping of the commandments, eventually leads us to follow Christ in order to reach perfection. Even though the rich young man keeps the commandments, he is reluctant to take that final step, renounce his possessions and follow Jesus, so he goes away sad. We can certainly do things and must cooperate with God's will, but only God is good and only God can make us good in the end.

But how do we learn about the good? Does the truth just fall upon us, or mustn't we go out and look for, even hunt after it? Don't we, and especially the young, have to ask questions in order to attain the truth? We first need to become aware of our ignorance before we can attain the truth. Young people are rightly suspicious of anyone who is too sure of himself, however. They need to be educated to see for themselves; the truth needs to be brought forth, perhaps with the help of a midwife like Socrates. This is not merely a quest for individual achievement, but one taken in conjunction with others, even as a people or a nation which forms the questions we ask and provide at least a provisional answer as to how we

are to live together. These questions and answers are passed on through religion, the arts, literature, music, and philosophy – all the things that make up the culture and history of a people. Without an understanding of culture, young people remain shallow and aimless, immature and lacking the rich soil they need to grow as they should.

In stressing the priority of culture, John Paul II also defended what he called the “subjectivity” not only of the individual but of each society, which will have different ways of associating and addressing various problems and issues. Such subjectivity is a strong antidote to the totalitarian tendencies not only of fascists, Nazis and communists, but also those who would impose some kind of universal homogenous state in the name of “global government/governance.” This remains a vital point in today’s world where the totalitarian tendencies may be softer but no less pernicious to the human spirit.

John Paul II’s 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus* remains, in my opinion, the best treatment of the modern economy in all of Catholic social teaching. No. 32 of that great encyclical is particularly perceptive in noting the importance of the knowledge economy, the “community of work which embraces ever widening circles,” and the “role of disciplined and creative human work” as well as the encouragement of “initiative and entrepreneurial ability.” And it is relentlessly and positively humanistic: “Indeed, besides the earth itself, man’s greatest resource is man himself.” At the same time, *Centesimus Annus* offers critiques of the modern economy with regard to marginalization and even state capitalism which have only grown stronger since 1991. Unfortunately, the threats to economic freedom are growing, as fewer and fewer young people are finding economic opportunities, so there needs to be some fundamental re-thinking about economics along these lines.

So in the end, John Paul II’s vision of freedom is respectful of each person’s subjectivity or individuality while also recognizing that freedom is much more than mere willfulness. It has to be **with** and **for** others in order to be truly good, which also means engaging in an inquiry of the good as a means of attaining the truth about man. We live in a world where young people are constantly flattered and given lots of bad advice, so this is a refreshing and bracing challenge to the spirit of the age.