
ON VALUES

POPE JOHN PAUL II'S MESSAGE TO THE YOUTH

Stanislaw Glaz*

Jesuit University in Cracow, Ul. Kopernika 26, Cracow, Poland

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Abstract

The aim of the present article is to show to young people a vision of life which is based on a sound and healthy conception of life, a search for the truth, a realization of the ideal of love, and also a life in freedom, as expounded in the teaching of Pope John Paul II.

Keywords: Christ, sense, life, freedom, truth

1. Introduction

One of the chief characteristics of youth is the ability to shape one's own life, and get to know one's capabilities and skills. Youth is such a period in a man's life when one is no longer a child, but at the same time, one is not yet an adult. The pace of physical development is slower, whereas the mental and spiritual development is extremely dynamic [1]. The young person asks himself/herself questions concerning the sense of life, one's own identity and place in the world. Youth is also the time of making choices concerning important life decisions; it is a time of reflection on one's own life and the motives behind of one's activities. By entering into a dialogue with the young, the Church points not only to the chances and possibilities contained in youth, but also to ways of realizing and improving them [2]. The above problems were presented at length in the teaching of John Paul II; the basic tenets of this teaching will be presented in the present paper.

John Paul II (Latin *Ioannes Paulus PP. II*), or in fact Karol Józef Wojtyła (born on the 18 May 1920 in Wadowice), was a Polish clergyman of the Roman-Catholic Church who subsequently became bishop metropolitan of Cracow, cardinal and ultimately the 264th pope. He was the first non-Italian pope since 1522. Karol Wojtyła obtained maturity as a thinker by reaching out to the vast philosophical tradition, as well as to the Bible and mysticism; at the same time, he was able to build a harmonious conception of man as an integral person. Wojtyła was an outstanding representative of personalism. In his philosophy, he represented neo-Thomism relying on the principles of phenomenology. As pope, he was one of the most influential leaders of the 20th century. His election to the

*E-mail: zjglaz@cyf-kr.edu.pl

Holy See exerted a great influence on the political events in Eastern Europe and Asia in the 80s and 90s of the 20th century. He contributed to the improvement of relations between the Catholic Church and Judaism, Islam the Orthodox Church and the Anglican Communion. In the course of his pontificate, he visited 129 countries and canonized more people than all of his predecessors in the past five centuries. He died on the 2nd April, 2005. The beatification and canonization process of John Paul II began a month after his funeral. A joint canonization of John XXIII and John Paul II took place on the 27th April 2014. The above event went down in history of the Church, among others due to the fact that two popes were proclaimed saints, in the presence of two bishops of Rome – the serving one and the retired one.

In his teaching, Pope John Paul II devoted a lot of space to young people living in different parts of the world and representing different cultures and religious beliefs. In his apostolic letter addressed to young people on the occasion of the International Youth Year [John Paul II. *Message from His Holiness Pope John Paul II*, World Congress on Youth, Barcelona, Spain. 8-15 July 1985, 63-65, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/youth/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_30111986_ii-world-youth-day.html], the pope referred to the period of youth as man's special treasure and a gift for the humankind. It is the gift of discovering and at the same time of planning, selecting, anticipating and making one's own first decisions which are of importance in the strictly personal dimension of human existence. According to John Paul II [3], the treasure of youth is expressed in the very intensity of questions concerning the conception of life. Young people often have problems in providing answers to questions that arise in their lives; they are unable to cope with the burden of queries concerning the very sense of their existence. They often have difficulties answering questions concerning the sense of suffering and the existence of evil in the world. Nevertheless, due to their innate sensitivity, they persist in looking for the truth. The latter is to serve the ideal of freedom which is very much sought after by young people. In his homilies addressed to youth, John Paul II explains what true freedom consists in, where the source of truth is and how one should understand the concept of love; he explains how to discover and form the right conception of one's own life. All of the above problems and notions are analysed by him in the context of the evangelical message.

2. Building a healthy conception of life

While observing the contemporary world, we can say that it is affected by various crises and cataclysms. One of the major problems of contemporary young people is a loss of sense of life and succumbing to excessive consumerism [4]. Many young people today ask themselves the question: what should one do not to waste one's own life? What should one do to give sense to one's life? How to control it, so as to make it really successful and happy? In order for life to have sense and to be valuable – says the pope – one should ask questions about eternal life. Everyone is subject to the transience of the world and

therefore, it is necessary to perceive the present through the perspective of eternity. In his apostolic letter written on the occasion of the International Youth Day [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/youth/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_30111986_ii-world-youth-day.html], the pope quotes the conversation between Christ and a young man who comes up to Him and asks: “Good master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mark 10.17). While replying to the young man’s query, Jesus points to God who is good and in whom all values have their source and fulfilment. The contemporary young man also asks: what must I do in order for my life to have sense and value? In the above-mentioned letter to the youth, the pope recalls the image of the Mother of God who points to Jesus and says: “Do whatever he tells you...” (John 2.5). By saying this the pope points to eternal life and the source of the most profound sense of life which is Jesus Christ. According to the pope, one should plan one’s life in unity with Christ. For it was Jesus who said about himself: “I am [...] the life” (John 14.6), and in another place: “I have come so that they [the sheep] may have life” (John 10.10). Therefore, the pope suggests to the young that one of Jesus’ goals is to fulfil the desire for life that man carries within him. Yet, what we are referring here to is not earthly life, but the life of God himself within man; in other words, eternal life. Observing His commandments and having complete trust in Him are the guarantees of a successful and happy life [5]. Only Christ is able to set man’s heart at rest. It is only Him who is able to endow man with strength and joy of life, regardless of any external limitations and obstacles. Discovering Christ and getting to know Him is the most beautiful adventure which may occur to man in his lifetime. One should assume that Jesus knows each and every one of us better than we know ourselves [6].

Youth is a difficult period in a man’s life as side by side with immense enthusiasm which usually accompanies young persons, they run the risk of being manipulated by his emotions [7]. Hence in his numerous homilies and public addresses, the pope often summoned the young to make the right choice. He was aware of the fact that without making the right choice, there can be no talk of a dignified life. In his message for the XVI World Youth Day, pope John Paul II recalled the words of Christ: “If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross every day and follow me” (Luke 9.23) [7, vol. XXIV(1), 374-379]. While explaining the sense of the above words, the pope talks of the radicalism of the choice that has to be made; for there is no room for hesitation or postponing one’s decisions here. It is a road which is beset with hardships. It calls for forgetting about oneself and serving others. In many cases, it also requires one to resign from one’s own plans for life and put one’s boundless trust in the Divine will. The pope reminds us [7; 7, vol. XXIV(1), 374-379] that if imitating Christ becomes our highest value, then thanks to it, all the other values fall into the right place and gain proper significance. Every choice should be preceded by deep reflection on its righteousness. In many cases, the decision is a difficult one and the temptation to choose the easier road is very strong.

The pope does not hesitate to tell the young people what is most important for them. The main task confronting young people everywhere is to be able to find the right life path, to take responsibility for their personal life and its future shape and value, as well as for social life. The selection of the right path in life concerns the values of justice and peace, as well as the moral order of one's own family, and ultimately of the entire society, the authentic common good. Every man partakes in the 'royal service' which bids each of us, following the example of Christ, to act precisely in accordance with one's vocation that we have pledged to fulfil with the help of the Divine grace. Such faithfulness to one's vocation, which we received from God, also carries with it a commonly-shared responsibility for the entire Church [8]. While encouraging youth to strive for their own development, the pope at the same time warns them that they should not become discouraged by those who having been disappointed by life, no longer listen to the most profound and authentic desires of their hearts. The pope is of the opinion that by cherishing their great desire for God, young people will be able to effectively protect themselves against mediocrity and conformism, which are so common in our contemporary society. This message points to the ever-present need for God in man's life and at the same time, it testifies to the fact that without God, there can be no happy life.

3. Realization of the law of love

The contemporary young people need love, but sometimes they also need an education for love. There are many rules and precepts that man is obliged to observe in his life – says the pope. Yet, among the commandments that God left to man, the one that takes precedence above all others is the one concerning love [9]. Love is the direct and most important reason why man should strive to become united with God. Love opens man up to God and to his neighbour. It enlivens man's entire spiritual life. Love gives sense to man's life; the striving towards infinity turns people into God's friends in communion with the Holy Trinity. In this way, love gives man a foretaste of heaven already here on earth and it transforms an 'external' into an 'internal' man. It constitutes a culmination of all man's talents and abilities. Man is only able to love God for His own sake, when he is totally involved and when he enters into cooperation with God and His grace. When man opens up to God's boundless love, he directs everything that he experiences towards Him and regards it as a divine grace, which is a disinterested gift from Him. The awareness of this gift engages and attracts man, as it was God who in his love was the first One who had enabled him to love his Creator. Love creates a perfect community, in which one is able to reach perfection. Christ's disciples may be recognized by their love for one another (John 13.35). Such love must emulate the ideal of Christ's love; in other words, it must be disinterested, patient, one that will endure whatever comes, one that takes no pleasure in injustice (1 Corinthians 13.1-13). It is only thus understood love that is able to overcome the existing conflicts and truly astound the world at large [10].

The pope [9, p. 201-207] encourages the young not to be afraid of a love that makes demands, as the latter ones are a guarantee of genuine love. John Paul II entrusted the youth from all over the world with the mission of building a civilization of love, here and now, at a place and time where they are at a given time. The corner stone (Ephesians 2.20) of a young man's life and of the new civilization is to be Jesus Christ. It is only when man stands close to Christ that he will be able to create a new order in the world, in the spirit of peace and justice. The pope reminds the young that building a civilization of love requires a determined and dedicated readiness to sacrifice, and a desire to open up new ways of social cooperation that would be able to overcome divisions and the mutually contradictory forms of materialism.

Where should one look for support in the above striving? During a meeting with young people at Jasna Góra in 1983 [11] the pope explained what true love consists in. "I am with You; I remember and remain vigilant" – these words express a faith in the love of God-the Creator, Christ-the Redeemer and His Mother Mary. These words are also a reply, which is a confession of love. They constitute a certain internal and mature program of love which should be particularly close to the hearts of young people. To love means to be close to the person one is in love with. To love also means to remember, to have the image of the loved person in one's heart and before one's eyes. One should also contemplate this love, to fathom it, so that it would become ever stronger. Yet, to love means primarily to be watchful and vigilant. As John Paul II puts it, being vigilant means to be a man of conscience. To be vigilant also means to notice others, to show solidarity with others and to be responsible.

4. Searching for the truth

According to the pope, the truth is of tremendous importance for the process of self-education, for developing humanity within oneself, and at the same time, for developing divine life which was engrafted in us at baptism and then reinforced in the sacrament of confirmation. The pope reminds the youth that there was someone who said: "You will learn the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8.32). The pope points to Christ as the One who is the Truth. It is only Him who is able to provide genuine answers to all the queries of the human heart.

When addressing young people, the pope [12] points to Christ as the fullness of truth. Christ is the absolute truth, an exhaustive answer of the Father to all questions that are currently troubling man. In Him, man may discover the whole truth about himself and the world. Christ is the Truth which can make one free. Only He is able to say: „I am... the Truth" (John 14.6). Only He is able to promise: „If you make my word your home, you will indeed be my disciples, you will learn the truth and the truth will make you free" (John 8.3-32). Thanks to getting to know Christ, we are able to learn how God solidarizes with every man, how He does not reject anyone and how He remembers about everyone. The words spoken by Christ: "I call you friends because I have made known to

you everything I have learnt from my Father” (John 15.15), indicate the true extent of God’s love revealed in Christ. They also indicate that Christ has no secrets before man. On the contrary – thanks to getting to know Christ, man is able to find the way to God; he gains an easier access to Him. In his homilies and addresses, John Paul II encourages the young to become zealous seekers of truth, as freedom which is detached from truth, is often transformed into a new and even more severe bondage.

In his homilies and public addresses, the pope often returns to the injunctions concerning the truth. During a meeting with young people on the occasion of the Fourth World Youth Days in Santiago de Compostela [12], Pope John Paul II focused the young people’s attention on Christ who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. The pope’s homily was interwoven with a suggestive performance staged by the young. In the part concerning the Truth, the young presented three scenes which constituted, as it were, their answers to questions concerning the significance and nature of truth. The first answer paints the picture of a continual race after the pleasures of life, proposed by the contemporary world. Yet the seekers of truth come to the conclusion that although they have experienced pleasure, they are still plunged in a void. The next answer came from the supporters of violence and those for whom the only thing that counts is power and the ability to rule and control others. This too proves to be an unsatisfactory solution. The subsequent answer came from drug addicts, for whom truth was to be found in an escape from reality. In spite of its ever growing popularity among young people, this road leads to enslavement and eventual destruction. What is the truth? What advice does the pope give to young people as regards this issue? In his homilies addressed to young people, the pope encouraged them to look for the truth about Christ and His Church; he also told them to be consistent and to always proclaim the truth.

5. Life in freedom

In his numerous addresses, the pope reminds the young what the true meaning of freedom really is. According to him, it is undoubtedly a gift of God himself. By saying this he wants to stress that it is not ‘some’ freedom, but that it is a freedom which comes from the Creator himself. By calling man into existence, God took a certain risk which involved granting man complete freedom [11, § 3-4]. When taken advantage of with dignity, freedom leads man towards truth and good. Yet already at the very beginning, man misused the opportunity to decide about himself which was granted to him. As a consequence of this, God had to ‘pay’ for man’s freedom by sending His own Son to die on the cross. At the same time, the pope warns young people saying that in our modern times, one often comes across views that freedom is an end in itself; that man is free when he resorts to freedom in any way he wishes and that such freedom should be striven for by both individuals and societies. Whereas in reality, freedom is a great good only when we are able to consciously use it for what we may refer to as genuine good [6, ch. 2]. Christ taught us that freedom

may attain its fullness only in love, thanks to a sense of dedication and duty. That is precisely the kind of freedom that Christ liberated us and is continually liberating us to. Without genuine love, man may become a slave of his own proclivities and various passions.

Sometimes, freedom may turn out to be dangerous for a young person. The pope refers to freedom as a great challenge and at the same time, a great risk. If one makes wrong use of it and if it does not serve the cause of truth – it may even destroy man. Freedom must be inseparably connected with truth, for as Christ himself said: “If you make my word your home, you will indeed be my disciples, you will learn the truth and the truth will make you free” (John 8.32). According to the pope [13], the above words express a demand for an honest attitude towards truth which is a condition of genuine freedom. Therefore, one may say that freedom is above all a gift and an obligation to be fulfilled by every Christian. In his homilies, John Paul II addresses this key message to the young and at the same time suggests that there is no genuine freedom except the one that Christ liberates within us. This is important for every man. It is also important for those who do not believe as they too may make good or bad use of freedom [14]. The latter view contains a full message of freedom and draws attention to its significance in the personal and social life of every man.

The hearts of young people are filled with great and noble desires. The pope [3; 6, ch. 3] tries to convince us that young people have an ‘innate sense of truth’ and a ‘spontaneous desire for freedom’. In order to be truly and genuinely free, one should make proper use of truth. Therefore, to be genuinely free means to be a man of righteous conscience, to be responsible and to act in a humane way towards others. At the same time, the pope points to an effective way which may help one to fully experience freedom and attain the condition of inner freedom. This way is none other but the Ten Divine Commandments. The latter have a lasting value and are inscribed in every man’s conscience. Observing the Divine commandments guarantees to man proper relations with the Lord God as well as with others. Thus one may say that the commandments constitute a starting point in every man’s life which may assure his achievement of freedom and eternal life [7, p. 377-378]. Freedom always requires a sacrifice. The hardship of building a worthwhile and honourable life, where the truth makes the young man free, is referred to by John Paul II as self-education [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/youth/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_30111986_ii-world-youth-day.html]. In the course of this process, a young person creates his/her inner freedom, the shape of his/her future life.

6. Conclusions

By referring to the Bible as well as his own experience, in his teaching, John Paul II reveals a young person who displays various abilities and needs, who lives in accordance with proper values and who has certain goals to realize in his/her life. This is due to man’s complex mental and spiritual nature.

Consequently, the young person is able to learn, create, enter into relationships with others as well as with God. According to the pope, man is only able to attain the fullness of life when he/she discovers in time his/her true vocation and potential and is ready to actualize both his/her spiritual and mental potential. The above fullness of life can be attained only when one is able to find a way to realize properly what one considers to be the sense of life and when one has at least a small degree of certainty that the values one has selected in life are proper and correct; only then can a person accept his/her life and feel needed by others. Moreover, one can experience this fullness only when one lives with the awareness that one encounters the sympathy and understanding of others as well as that of Christ with His teaching and offer of assistance.

The pope presents the young as people who are responsible for their lives. This responsibility may reveal itself in searching for truth, and in taking the right decisions. God summons the young to cooperation and urges them to perfect themselves as well as the world around them. The Creator had endowed man with free will and that is why, man is able to make decisions concerning the direction of his/her development. According to John Paul II [2, 5], youth is a period of making choices and of taking life decisions. It is a period of acquiring knowledge and experience, a time of reflection on the motives of one's choices and conduct. It is a moment in life when man discloses to others his needs and intentions. It is also a time when one comes to realize that without searching for the truth and without leading a life filled with love, our existence has no sense. The fullness of truth and love is revealed to man by Christ in the Church. It is in Him and with Him that man is able to realize his life's vocation more effectively and become a man who is fully integrated and more in the image of Christ.

The present article leads one to a few conclusions concerning youth which are directly associated with the teaching of John Paul II and may be of use to one in the process of self-realization.

- Young people should be in the centre of interest of all pastoral activities; the latter should take into account the young people's educational and cultural conditionings as well as their spiritual, mental and social needs.
- In the face of the changes which are currently taking place in the life of young people, as well as the social and cultural transformations occurring in church ministry, one should take into consideration the possibility of searching for the most suitable forms of young people's education, which take into account young people's current spiritual and social needs as well as their expectations and hopes; the main goal of this approach is to enable one to reach out to the young with the message of Good News and to make the evangelical content more accessible and digestible to them.
- What is most needed to enable a full development of young people's religious and personal life are proper conditions and a healthy environment which would favour their integral growth and development. In such conditions, young people would be given an opportunity to grow in faith, to learn prayer and spread charitable works and activity.

- Among the specific tools which help build the right attitude of the young generation, are all types of religious and social organizations, participation in prayer groups, participation in the Eucharist and retreats as well as proper use of the mass media.
- Young people are often aware of experiencing a religious and moral crisis which may concern a breakdown of their faith, the feeling of being abandoned by God, or else of neglecting their prayer. Hence it is advisable that psychological and pastoral counselling centres should be created for them, so that they could obtain assistance there.

The present article focusing on a healthy conception of life, the search for truth, a realization of love, as well as actualization of freedom in young people's lives in the teaching of pope John Paul II, does not by any means exhaust the entirety of the discussed problems. Yet, it may contribute to other similar and sometimes more detailed analyses of the above-mentioned issues.

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