

XXXII World Youth Day: “The Mighty One has done great things for me” (Lk 1:49)

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS FOR THE THIRTY-SECOND WORLD YOUTH DAY 2017

“The Mighty One has done great things for me” (Lk 1:49)

Dear Young Friends,

Here we are, on the road again, following our great meeting in Kraków, where we celebrated the Thirty-first World Youth Day and the Jubilee for Young People as part of the Holy Year of Mercy. We took as our guides Saint John Paul II and Saint Faustina Kowalska, the apostles of divine mercy, in order to offer a concrete response to the challenges of our time. We had a powerful experience of fraternity and joy, and we gave the world a sign of hope. Our different flags and languages were not a reason for rivalry and division, but an opportunity to open the doors of our hearts and to build bridges.

At the conclusion of the Kraków World Youth Day, I announced the next stop in our pilgrimage, which with God’s help will bring us to Panama in 2019. On this journey we will be accompanied by the Virgin Mary, whom all generations call blessed (cf. Lk 1:48). This new leg of our journey picks up from the one that preceded it, centred on the Beatitudes, and invites us to press forward. I fervently hope that you young people will continue to press forward, not only cherishing the memory of the past, but also with courage in the present and hope for the future. These attitudes were certainly present in the young Mary of Nazareth and are clearly expressed in the themes chosen for the three coming World Youth Days. This year (2017) we will reflect on the faith of Mary, who says in the Magnificat: “The Mighty One has done great things for me” (Lk 1:49). The theme for next year (2018) – “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God” (Lk 1:30) – will lead us to meditate on the courageous charity with which the Virgin welcomed the message of the angel. The 2019 World Youth Day will be inspired by the words “I am the servant of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38), Mary’s hope-filled reply to the angel.

In October 2018, the Church will celebrate the Synod of Bishops on the theme: Youth, Faith and Vocational Discernment. We will talk about how you, as young people, are experiencing the life of faith amid the challenges of our time. We will also discuss the question of how you can develop a life project by discerning your personal vocation, whether it be to marriage in the secular and professional world, or to the consecrated life and priesthood. It is my hope that the journey towards the World Youth Day in Panama and the process of preparation for the Synod will move forward in tandem.

Our age does not need young people who are “couch-potatoes”

According to Luke’s Gospel, once Mary has received the message of the angel and said “yes” to the call to become the Mother of the Saviour, she sets out in haste to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who was in the sixth month of her pregnancy (cf. 1:36, 39). Mary is very young; what she was told is a great gift, but it

also entails great challenges. The Lord assured her of his presence and support, yet many things remain obscure in her mind and heart. Yet Mary does not shut herself up at home or let herself be paralyzed by fear or pride. Mary is not the type that, to be comfortable, needs a good sofa where she can feel safe and sound. She is no couch potato! (cf. Address at the Vigil, Kraków, 30 July 2016). If her elderly cousin needs a hand, she does not hesitate, but immediately sets off.

It was a long way to the house of Elizabeth, about 150 kilometres. But the young woman from Nazareth, led by the Holy Spirit, knows no obstacles. Surely, those days of journeying helped her to meditate on the marvellous event of which she was a part. So it is with us, whenever we set out on pilgrimage. Along the way, the events of our own lives come to mind, we learn to appreciate their meaning and we discern our vocation, which then becomes clear in the encounter with God and in service to others.

The Mighty One has done great things for me

The meeting of the two women, one young and the other elderly, is filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit and charged with joy and wonder (cf. Lk 1:40-45). The two mothers, like the children they bear, practically dance for joy. Elizabeth, impressed by Mary's faith, cries out: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord" (v. 45). One of the great gifts that the Virgin received was certainly that of faith. Belief in God is a priceless gift, but one that has to be received. Elizabeth blesses Mary for this, and she in turn responds with the song of the Magnificat (cf. Lk 1:46-55), in which we find the words: "The Mighty One has done great things for me" (v. 49).

Mary's is a revolutionary prayer, the song of a faith-filled young woman conscious of her limits, yet confident in God's mercy. She gives thanks to God for looking upon her lowliness and for the work of salvation that he has brought about for the people, the poor and the humble. Faith is at the heart of Mary's entire story. Her song helps us to understand the mercy of the Lord as the driving force of history, the history of each of us and of all humanity.

When God touches the heart of a young man or woman, they become capable of doing tremendous things. The "great things" that the Almighty accomplished in the life of Mary speak also to our own journey in life, which is not a meaningless meandering, but a pilgrimage that, for all its uncertainties and sufferings, can find its fulfilment in God (cf. Angelus, 15 August 2015). You may say to me: "But Father, I have my limits, I am a sinner, what can I do?" When the Lord calls us, he doesn't stop at what we are or what we have done. On the contrary, at the very moment that he calls us, he is looking ahead to everything we can do, all the love we are capable of giving. Like the young Mary, you can allow your life to become a means for making the world a better place. Jesus is calling you to leave your mark in life, your mark on history, both your own and that of so many others (cf. Address at the Vigil, Kraków, 30 July 2016).

Being young does not mean being disconnected from the past

Mary was little more than an adolescent, like many of you. Yet in the Magnificat, she echoes the praises of her people and their history. This shows us that being young does not mean being disconnected from the past. Our personal history is part of a long trail, a communal journey that has preceded us over the

ages. Like Mary, we belong to a people. History teaches us that, even when the Church has to sail on stormy seas, the hand of God guides her and helps her to overcome moments of difficulty. The genuine experience of the Church is not like a flash mob, where people agree to meet, do their thing and then go their separate ways. The Church is heir to a long tradition which, passed down from generation to generation, is further enriched by the experience of each individual. Your personal history has a place within the greater history of the Church.

Being mindful of the past also helps us to be open to the unexpected ways that God acts in us and through us. It also helps us to be open to being chosen as a means by which God brings about his saving plan. As young people, you too can do great things and take on fuller responsibilities, if only you recognize God's mercy and power at work in your lives.

I would like to ask you some questions. How do you "save" in your memory the events and experiences of your life? What do you do with the facts and the images present in your memory? Some of you, particularly those hurt by certain situations in life, might want to "reset" your own past, to claim the right to forget it all. But I would like to remind you that there is no saint without a past, or a sinner without a future. The pearl is born of a wound in the oyster! Jesus, by his love, can heal our hearts and turn our lives into genuine pearls. As Saint Paul said, the Lord can show his power through our weakness (cf. 2 Cor 12:9).

Yet our memories should not remain crammed together, as in the memory of a hard drive. Nor can we archive everything in some sort of virtual "cloud". We need to learn how to make past events a dynamic reality on which to reflect and to draw lessons and meaning for the present and the future. This is no easy task, but one necessary for discovering the thread of God's love running through the whole of our life.

Many people say that young people are distracted and superficial. They are wrong! Still, we should acknowledge our need to reflect on our lives and direct them towards the future. To have a past is not the same as to have a history. In our life we can have plenty of memories, but how many of them are really a part of our memory? How many are significant for our hearts and help to give meaning to our lives? In the social media, we see faces of young people appearing in any number of pictures recounting more or less real events, but we don't know how much of all this is really "history", an experience that can be communicated and endowed with purpose and meaning. Television is full of "reality shows" which are not real stories, but only moments passed before a television camera by characters living from day to day, without a greater plan. Don't let yourselves be led astray by this false image of reality! Be the protagonists of your history; decide your own future.

How to remain connected, following the example of Mary

It is said of Mary that she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart (cf. Lk 2:19, 51). This unassuming young woman of Nazareth teaches us by her example to preserve the memory of the events of our lives but also to put them together and reconstruct the unity of all the fragments that, put together, can make up a mosaic. How can we learn to do this in practice? Let me offer you some suggestions.

At the end of each day, we can stop for a few minutes to remember the good times and the challenges, the things that went well and those that went wrong. In this way, before God and before ourselves, we can express our gratitude, our regrets and our trust. If you wish, you can also write them down in a notebook as a kind of spiritual journal. This means praying in life, with life and about life, and it will surely help you to recognize the great things that the Lord is doing for each of you. As Saint Augustine said, we can find God in the vast fields of our memory (cf. Confessions, X, 8, 12).

Reading the Magnificat, we realize how well Mary knew the word of God. Every verse of her song has a parallel in the Old Testament. The young mother of Jesus knew the prayers of her people by heart. Surely her parents and her grandparents had taught them to her. How important it is for the faith to be passed down from one generation to another! There is a hidden treasure in the prayers that past generations have taught us, in the lived spirituality of ordinary people that we call popular piety. Mary inherits the faith of her people and shapes it in a song that is entirely her own, yet at the same time the song of the entire Church, which sings it with her. If you, as young people, want to sing a Magnificat all your own, and make your lives a gift for humanity as a whole, it is essential to connect with the historical tradition and the prayer of those who have gone before you. To do so, it is important to be familiar with the Bible, God's word, reading it daily and letting it speak to your lives, and interpreting everyday events in the light of what the Lord says to you in the sacred Scriptures. In prayer and in the prayerful reading of the Bible (*lectio divina*), Jesus will warm your hearts and illumine your steps, even in the dark moments of life (cf. Lk 24:13-35).

Mary also teaches us to live "eucharistically", that is to learn how to give thanks and praise, and not to fixate on our problems and difficulties alone. In the process of living, today's prayers become tomorrow's reasons for thanksgiving. In this way, your participation in Holy Mass and the occasions when you celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation will be both a high point and new beginning. Your lives will be renewed each day in forgiveness and they will become an act of perennial praise to the Almighty. "Trust the memory of God ... his memory is a heart filled with tender compassion, one that rejoices in erasing in us every trace of evil" (cf. Homily at Mass, World Youth Day, Kraków, 31 July 2016).

We have seen that the Magnificat wells up in Mary's heart at the moment when she meets her elderly cousin Elizabeth. With her faith, her keen gaze and her words, Elizabeth helps the Virgin to understand more fully the greatness of what God is accomplishing in her and the mission that he has entrusted to her. But what about you? Do you realize how extraordinarily enriching the encounter between the young and the elderly can be? How much attention do you pay to the elderly, to your grandparents? With good reason you want to "soar", your heart is full of great dreams, but you need the wisdom and the vision of the elderly. Spread your wings and fly, but also realize that you need to rediscover your roots and to take up the torch from those who have gone before. To build a meaningful future, you need to know and appreciate the past (cf. *Amoris Laetitia*, 190, 193). Young people have strength, while the elderly have memory and wisdom. As Mary did with Elizabeth, look to the elderly, to your grandparents. They will speak to you of things that can thrill your minds and fill your hearts.

Creative fidelity for building the future

It is true that you are still young and so it can be hard for you to appreciate the importance of tradition. But know that this is not the same as being traditionalists. No! When Mary in the Gospel says: “The Mighty One has done great things for me”, she means to say that those “great things” are not over, but are still happening in the present. It is not about the distant past. Being mindful of the past does not mean being nostalgic or remaining attached to a certain period of history, but rather being able to acknowledge where we have come from, so that we can keep going back to essentials and throwing ourselves with creative fidelity into building the future. It would be problematic and ultimately useless to cultivate a paralyzing memory that makes us keep doing the same things in the same way. It is a gift of God to see how many of you, with your questions, dreams and uncertainties, refuse to listen to those who say that things cannot change.

A society that values only the present tends to dismiss everything inherited from the past, as for example the institutions of marriage, consecrated life and priestly mission. These end up being seen as meaningless and outdated forms. People think it is better to live in “open” situations, going through life as if it were a reality show, without aim or purpose. Don’t let yourselves be deceived! God came to enlarge the horizons of our life in every direction. He helps us to give due value to the past so as better to build a future of happiness. Yet this is possible only if we have authentic experiences of love, which help us concretely to discern the Lord’s call and to respond to it. For only that can bring us true happiness.

Dear young people I entrust our journey towards Panama, together with the process of preparation for the next Synod of Bishops, to the maternal intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary. I ask you to keep in mind two important anniversaries in 2017: the three-hundredth anniversary of the finding of the image of Our Lady of Aparecida in Brazil and the centenary of the apparitions in Fatima, Portugal, where, God willing, I plan to make a pilgrimage this coming May. Saint Martin of Porres, one of the patron saints of Latin America and of the 2019 World Youth Day, in going about his humble daily duties, used to offer the best flowers to Mary, as a sign of his filial love. May you too cultivate a relationship of familiarity and friendship with Our Lady, entrusting to her your joys, your worries and your concerns. I assure you that you will not regret it!

May the maiden of Nazareth, who in the whole world has assumed a thousand names and faces in order to be close to her children, intercede for all of us and help us to sing of the great works that the Lord is accomplishing in us and through us.

FRANCIS

From the Vatican, 27 February 2017

Memory of Saint Gabriel of Our Lady of Sorrows