

VISIT TO ST. LOUIS: Meeting with Young People
Pope John Paul II

The time for action is now!

Let your light shine, Holy Father tells young Americans

After arrival ceremonies at the St Louis airport on Tuesday, 26 January, the Holy Father went to the Archbishop's Residence, where he had lunch and rested. In the evening he was taken to the Kiel Center, a sports complex, for a meeting with young people. Their gathering took the form of a prayer service with readings from the New Testament (1 Tm 4:7-12; Mt 5:14-16), a two part address by the Pope and a renewal by the young people of their commitment to live with Christ. Here is the text of the Holy Father's address, which was given in English.

(First Part)

Dear Young People of St. Louis,

Dear Young People of the United States,

Praised be Jesus Christ!

1. Your warm and enthusiastic welcome makes me very happy. It tells me that tonight the Pope belongs to you. I have just been in Mexico City, to celebrate the conclusion of the Synod of Bishops for America. There I had the joy of being with many thousands of young people. And now, my joy continues here with you, the young people of St. Louis and Missouri, and of the whole United States.

2. We are gathered here this evening to listen to Jesus as he speaks to us through his word and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

We have just heard the Apostle Paul say to Timothy, his young fellow evangelizer: "Train yourself for devotion" (1 Tim 4:7). These are important words for every Christian, for everyone who truly seeks to follow the Lord and to put his words into practice. They are especially important for you, the young people of the Church. And so you need to ask yourselves: what training am I doing in order to live a truly Christian life?

You all know what "training" is, and what it signifies. In fact, we are here in the Kiel Center where many people train long and hard in order to compete in different sports. Today, this impressive stadium has become another kind of training ground — not for hockey or soccer or basketball, but for that training that will help you to live your faith in Jesus more decisively. This is the "training in devotion" that Saint Paul is referring to — the training that makes it possible for you to give yourselves without reservation to the Lord and to the work that he calls you to do!

3. I am told that there was much excitement in St. Louis during the recent baseball season, when two great players (Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa) were competing to break the home-run record. You can feel the same great enthusiasm as you train for a different goal: the goal of following Christ, the goal of bringing his message to the world.

Each one of you belongs to Christ, and Christ belongs to you. At Baptism you were claimed for Christ with the Sign of the Cross; you received the Catholic faith as a treasure to be shared with others. In Confirmation, you were sealed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit and strengthened for

your Christian mission and vocation. In the Eucharist, you receive the food that nourishes you for the spiritual challenges of each day.

I am especially pleased that so many of you had the opportunity today to receive the Sacrament of Penance, the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In this Sacrament you experience the Savior's tender mercy and love in a most personal way, when you are freed from sin and from its ugly companion which is shame. Your burdens are lifted and you experience the joy of new life in Christ.

Your belonging to the Church can find no greater expression or support than by sharing in the Eucharist every Sunday in your parishes. Christ gives us the gift of his body and blood to make us one body, one spirit in him, to bring us more deeply into communion with him and with all the members of his Body, the Church. Make the Sunday celebration in your parishes a real encounter with Jesus in the community of his followers: this is an essential part of your "training in devotion" to the Lord!

4. Dear young friends, in the Reading we have just heard, the Apostle Paul tells Timothy: "Let no one have contempt for your youth" (1 Tim 4:12). He says this because youth is a marvelous gift of God. It is a time of special energies, special opportunities and special responsibilities. Christ and the Church need your special talents. Use well the gifts the Lord has given you!

This is the time of your "training", of your physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual development. But this does not mean that you can put off until later your meeting with Christ and your sharing in the Church's mission. Even though you are young, the time for action is now! Jesus does not have "contempt for your youth". He does not set you aside for a later time when you will be older and your training will be complete. Your training will never be finished. Christians are always in training. You are ready for what Christ wants of you now. He wants you – all of you – to be light to the world, as only young people can be light. It is time to let your light shine!

In all my travels I tell the world about your youthful energies, your gifts and your readiness to love and serve. And wherever I go I challenge young people – as a friend – to live in the light and truth of Jesus Christ.

I urge you to let his word enter your hearts, and then from the bottom of your hearts to tell him: "Here I am Lord, I come to do your will!" (cf. Heb 10:7).

Second Part

"You are the light of the world. . . Your light must shine before all" (Mt 5:14.16).

Dear Young People,

1. Ask yourselves: Do I believe these words of Jesus in the Gospel? Jesus is calling you the light of the world. He is asking you to let your light shine before others. I know that in your hearts you want to say: "Here I am, Lord. Here I am. I come to do your will" (Responsorial Psalm; cf. Heb 10:7). But only if you are one with Jesus can you share his light and be a light to the world.

Are you ready for this?

Sadly, too many people today are living apart from the light – in a world of illusions, a world of fleeting shadows and promises unfulfilled. If you look to Jesus, if you live the Truth that is Jesus, you will have in you the light that reveals the truths and values on which to build your own happiness, while building a world of justice, peace and solidarity. Remember what Jesus said: “I am the light of the world; those who follow me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (cf. Jn 8:12).

Because Jesus is the Light, we too become light when we proclaim him. This is the heart of the Christian mission to which each of you has been called through Baptism and Confirmation. You are called to make the light of Christ shine brightly in the world.

2. When you were little, were you sometimes afraid of the dark? Today you are no longer children afraid of the dark. You are teenagers and young adults. But already you realize that there is another kind of darkness in the world: the darkness of doubt and uncertainty. You may feel the darkness of loneliness and isolation. Your anxieties may come from questions about your future, or regrets about past choices.

Sometimes the world itself seems filled with darkness. The darkness of children who go hungry and even die. The darkness of homeless people who lack work and proper medical care. The darkness of violence: violence against the unborn child, violence in families, the violence of gangs, the violence of sexual abuse, the violence of drugs that destroy the body, mind and heart. There is something terribly wrong when so many young people are overcome by hopelessness to the point of taking their own lives. And already in parts of this nation, laws have been passed which allow doctors to end the lives of the very people they are sworn to help. God’s gift of life is being rejected. Death is chosen over life, and this brings with it the darkness of despair.

3. But you believe in the light (cf. Jn 12:36)! Do not listen to those who encourage you to lie, to shirk responsibility, to put yourselves first. Do not listen to those who tell you that chastity is passé. In your hearts you know that true love is a gift from God and respects his plan for the union of man and woman in marriage. Do not be taken in by false values and deceptive slogans, especially about your freedom. True freedom is a wonderful gift from God, and it has been a cherished part of your country’s history. But when freedom is separated from truth, individuals lose their moral direction and the very fabric of society begins to unravel.

Freedom is not the ability to do anything we want, whenever we want. Rather, freedom is the ability to live responsibly the truth of our relationship with God and with one another. Remember what Jesus said: “you will know the truth and the truth will set you free” (Jn 8:32). Let no one mislead you or prevent you from seeing what really matters. Turn to Jesus, listen to him, and discover the true meaning and direction of your lives.

4. You are children of the light (cf. Jn 12:36)! You belong to Christ, and he has called you by name. Your first responsibility is to get to know as much as you can about him, in your parishes,

in religious instruction in your high schools and colleges, in your youth groups and Newman Centers.

But you will get to know him truly and personally only through prayer. What is needed is that you talk to him, and listen to him.

Today we are living in an age of instant communications. But do you realize what a unique form of communication prayer is? Prayer enables us to meet God at the most profound level of our being. It connects us directly to God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in a constant exchange of love.

Through prayer you will learn to become the light of the world, because in prayer you become one with the source of our true light, Jesus himself.

5. Each of you has a special mission in life, and you are each called to be a disciple of Christ. Many of you will serve God in the vocation of Christian married life; some of you will serve him as dedicated single persons; some as priests and religious. But all of you must be the light of the world. To those of you who think that Christ may be inviting you to follow him in the priesthood or the consecrated life I make this personal appeal: I ask you to open your hearts generously to him; do not delay your response. The Lord will help you to know his will; he will help you to follow your vocation courageously.

6. Young friends, in the days and weeks and years ahead, for as long as you remember this evening, remember that the Pope came to the United States, to the City of St. Louis, to call the young people of America to Christ, to invite you to follow him. He came to challenge you to be the light of the world! "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it" (Jn 1:5). Jesus who has conquered sin and death reminds you: "I am with you always" (Mt 28:20). He says: "Courage! It is I; have no fear" (Mk 6:50).

On the horizon of this city stands the Gateway Arch, which often catches the sunlight in its different colors and hues. In a similar way, in a thousand different ways, you must reflect the light of Christ through your lives of prayer and joyful service of others. With the help of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, the young people of America will do this magnificently!

Remember: Christ is calling you; the Church needs you; the Pope believes in you and he expects great things of you!

Praised be Jesus Christ!

At the end of the service some of the young people gave the Holy Father a hockey stick and jersey. The Pope appreciated the gift and said extemporaneously.

So I am prepared to return once more to play hockey! But if I will be able to, that is the question. Perhaps after this meeting I will be a bit more ready!