

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:3)

Dear Young Friends,

How vividly I recall the remarkable meeting we had in Rio de Janeiro for the Twenty-eighth World Youth Day. It was a great celebration of faith and fellowship! The wonderful people of Brazil welcomed us with open arms, like the statue of Christ the Redeemer which looks down from the hill of Corcovado over the magnificent expanse of Copacabana beach. There, on the seashore, Jesus renewed his call to each one of us to become his missionary disciples. May we perceive this call as the most important thing in our lives and share this gift with others, those near and far, even to the distant geographical and existential peripheries of our world.

The next stop on our intercontinental youth pilgrimage will be in Krakow in 2016. As a way of accompanying our journey together, for the next three years I would like to reflect with you on the Beatitudes found in the Gospel of Saint Matthew (5:1-12). This year we will begin by reflecting on the first Beatitude: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:3). For 2015 I suggest: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Mt 5:8). Then, in 2016, our theme will be: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Mt 5:7).

1. The revolutionary power of the Beatitudes

It is always a joyful experience for us to read and reflect on the Beatitudes! Jesus proclaimed them in his first great sermon, preached on the shore of the sea of Galilee. There was a very large crowd, so Jesus went up on the mountain to teach his disciples. That is why it is known as "the Sermon on the Mount". In the Bible, the mountain is regarded as a place where God reveals himself. Jesus, by preaching on the mount, reveals himself to be a divine teacher, a new Moses. What does he tell us? He shows us the way to life, the way that he himself has taken. Jesus himself is the way, and he proposes this way as the path to true happiness. Throughout his life, from his birth in the stable in Bethlehem until his death on the cross and his resurrection, Jesus embodied the Beatitudes. All the promises of God's Kingdom were fulfilled in him.

In proclaiming the Beatitudes, Jesus asks us to follow him and to travel with him along the path of love, the path that alone leads to eternal life. It is not an easy journey, yet the Lord promises us his grace and he never abandons us. We face so many challenges in life: poverty, distress, humiliation, the struggle for justice, persecutions, the difficulty of daily conversion, the effort to remain faithful to our call to holiness, and many others. But if we open the door to Jesus and allow him to be part of our lives, if we share our joys and sorrows with him, then we will experience the peace and joy that only God, who is infinite love, can give.

The Beatitudes of Jesus are new and revolutionary. They present a model of happiness contrary to what is usually communicated by the media and by the prevailing wisdom. A worldly way of thinking finds it scandalous that God became one of us and died on a cross! According to the logic of this

world, those whom Jesus proclaimed blessed are regarded as useless, “losers”. What is glorified is success at any cost, affluence, the arrogance of power and self-affirmation at the expense of others.

Jesus challenges us, young friends, to take seriously his approach to life and to decide which path is right for us and leads to true joy. This is the great challenge of faith. Jesus was not afraid to ask his disciples if they truly wanted to follow him or if they preferred to take another path (cf. Jn 6:67). Simon Peter had the courage to reply: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (Jn 6:68). If you too are able to say “yes” to Jesus, your lives will become both meaningful and fruitful.

2. The courage to be happy

What does it mean to be “blessed” (makarioi in Greek)? To be blessed means to be happy. Tell me: Do you really want to be happy? In an age when we are constantly being enticed by vain and empty illusions of happiness, we risk settling for less and “thinking small” when it comes to the meaning of life. Think big instead! Open your hearts! As Blessed Piergiorgio Frassati once said, “To live without faith, to have no heritage to uphold, to fail to struggle constantly to defend the truth: this is not living. It is scraping by. We should never just scrape by, but really live” (Letter to I. Bonini, 27 February 1925). In his homily on the day of Piergiorgio Frassati’s beatification (20 May 1990), John Paul II called him “a man of the Beatitudes” (AAS 82 [1990], 1518).

If you are really open to the deepest aspirations of your hearts, you will realize that you possess an unquenchable thirst for happiness, and this will allow you to expose and reject the “low cost” offers and approaches all around you. When we look only for success, pleasure and possessions, and we turn these into idols, we may well have moments of exhilaration, an illusory sense of satisfaction, but ultimately we become enslaved, never satisfied, always looking for more. It is a tragic thing to see a young person who “has everything”, but is weary and weak.

Saint John, writing to young people, told them: “You are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one” (1 Jn 2:14). Young people who choose Christ are strong: they are fed by his word and they do not need to ‘stuff themselves’ with other things! Have the courage to swim against the tide. Have the courage to be truly happy! Say no to an ephemeral, superficial and throwaway culture, a culture that assumes that you are incapable of taking on responsibility and facing the great challenges of life!

3. Blessed are the poor in spirit...

The first Beatitude, our theme for the next World Youth Day, says that the poor in spirit are blessed for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. At a time when so many people are suffering as a result of the

financial crisis, it might seem strange to link poverty and happiness. How can we consider poverty a blessing?

First of all, let us try to understand what it means to be “poor in spirit”. When the Son of God became man, he chose the path of poverty and self-emptying. As Saint Paul said in his letter to the Philippians: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness” (2:5-7). Jesus is God who strips himself of his glory. Here we see God’s choice to be poor: he was rich and yet he became poor in order to enrich us through his poverty (cf. 2 Cor 8:9). This is the mystery we contemplate in the crib when we see the Son of God lying in a manger, and later on the cross, where his self-emptying reaches its culmination.

The Greek adjective *ptochós* (poor) does not have a purely material meaning. It means “a beggar”, and it should be seen as linked to the Jewish notion of the *anawim*, “God’s poor”. It suggests lowliness, a sense of one’s limitations and existential poverty. The *anawim* trust in the Lord, and they know that they can count on him.

As Saint Therese of the Child Jesus clearly saw, by his incarnation Jesus came among us as a poor beggar, asking for our love. The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us that “man is a beggar before God” (No. 2559) and that prayer is the encounter of God’s thirst and our own thirst (No. 2560).

Saint Francis of Assisi understood perfectly the secret of the Beatitude of the poor in spirit. Indeed, when Jesus spoke to him through the leper and from the crucifix, Francis recognized both God’s grandeur and his own lowliness. In his prayer, the Poor Man of Assisi would spend hours asking the Lord: “Who are you?” “Who am I?” He renounced an affluent and carefree life in order to marry “Lady Poverty”, to imitate Jesus and to follow the Gospel to the letter. Francis lived in imitation of Christ in his poverty and in love for the poor – for him the two were inextricably linked – like two sides of one coin.

You might ask me, then: What can we do, specifically, to make poverty in spirit a way of life, a real part of our own lives? I will reply by saying three things.

First of all, try to be free with regard to material things. The Lord calls us to a Gospel lifestyle marked by sobriety, by a refusal to yield to the culture of consumerism. This means being concerned with the essentials and learning to do without all those unneeded extras which hem us in. Let us learn to be detached from possessiveness and from the idolatry of money and lavish spending. Let us put Jesus first. He can free us from the kinds of idol-worship which enslave us. Put your trust in God, dear young friends! He knows and loves us, and he never forgets us. Just as he provides for the lilies of the field (cf. Mt 6:28), so he will make sure that we lack nothing. If we are to come through the financial

crisis, we must be also ready to change our lifestyle and avoid so much wastefulness. Just as we need the courage to be happy, we also need the courage to live simply.

Second, if we are to live by this Beatitude, all of us need to experience a conversion in the way we see the poor. We have to care for them and be sensitive to their spiritual and material needs. To you young people I especially entrust the task of restoring solidarity to the heart of human culture. Faced with old and new forms of poverty – unemployment, migration and addictions of various kinds – we have the duty to be alert and thoughtful, avoiding the temptation to remain indifferent. We have to remember all those who feel unloved, who have no hope for the future and who have given up on life out of discouragement, disappointment or fear. We have to learn to be on the side of the poor, and not just indulge in rhetoric about the poor! Let us go out to meet them, look into their eyes and listen to them. The poor provide us with a concrete opportunity to encounter Christ himself, and to touch his suffering flesh.

However – and this is my third point – the poor are not just people to whom we can give something. They have much to offer us and to teach us. How much we have to learn from the wisdom of the poor! Think about it: several hundred years ago a saint, Benedict Joseph Labré, who lived on the streets of Rome from the alms he received, became a spiritual guide to all sorts of people, including nobles and prelates. In a very real way, the poor are our teachers. They show us that people's value is not measured by their possessions or how much money they have in the bank. A poor person, a person lacking material possessions, always maintains his or her dignity. The poor can teach us much about humility and trust in God. In the parable of the pharisee and the tax-collector (cf. Lk 18:9-14), Jesus holds the tax-collector up as a model because of his humility and his acknowledgment that he is a sinner. The widow who gave her last two coins to the temple treasury is an example of the generosity of all those who have next to nothing and yet give away everything they have (Lk 21:1-4).

4. ... for theirs is the kingdom of heaven

The central theme of the Gospel is the kingdom of God. Jesus is the kingdom of God in person; he is Immanuel, God-with-us. And it is in the human heart that the kingdom, God's sovereignty, takes root and grows. The kingdom is at once both gift and promise. It has already been given to us in Jesus, but it has yet to be realized in its fullness. That is why we pray to the Father each day: "Thy kingdom come".

There is a close connection between poverty and evangelization, between the theme of the last World Youth Day – "Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations!" (Mt 28:19) – and the theme for this year: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:3). The Lord wants a poor Church which evangelizes the poor. When Jesus sent the Twelve out on mission, he said to them: "Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff; for the labourers deserve their food" (Mt 10:9-10). Evangelical poverty is a basic condition for spreading the kingdom of God. The most beautiful and spontaneous expressions

of joy which I have seen during my life were by poor people who had little to hold onto. Evangelization in our time will only take place as the result of contagious joy.

We have seen, then, that the Beatitude of the poor in spirit shapes our relationship with God, with material goods and with the poor. With the example and words of Jesus before us, we realize how much we need to be converted, so that the logic of being more will prevail over that of having more! The saints can best help us to understand the profound meaning of the Beatitudes. So the canonization of John Paul II, to be celebrated on the Second Sunday of Easter, will be an event marked by immense joy. He will be the great patron of the World Youth Days which he inaugurated and always supported. In the communion of saints he will continue to be a father and friend to all of you.

This month of April marks the thirtieth anniversary of the entrustment of the Jubilee Cross of the Redemption to the young. That symbolic act by John Paul II was the beginning of the great youth pilgrimage which has since crossed the five continents. The Pope's words on that Easter Sunday in 1984 remain memorable: "My dear young people, at the conclusion of the Holy Year, I entrust to you the sign of this Jubilee Year: the cross of Christ! Carry it throughout the world as a symbol of the love of the Lord Jesus for humanity, and proclaim to everyone that it is only in Christ, who died and rose from the dead, that salvation and redemption are to be found".

Dear friends, the Magnificat, the Canticum of Mary, poor in spirit, is also the song of everyone who lives by the Beatitudes. The joy of the Gospel arises from a heart which, in its poverty, rejoices and marvels at the works of God, like the heart of Our Lady, whom all generations call "blessed" (cf. Lk 1:48). May Mary, Mother of the poor and Star of the new evangelization help us to live the Gospel, to embody the Beatitudes in our lives, and to have the courage always to be happy.

From the Vatican, 21 January 2014

Memorial of Saint Agnes, Virgin and Martyr

Francis