

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God (Mt 5: 8)

Dear Young Friends,

We continue our spiritual pilgrimage toward Krakow, where in July 2016 the next international World Youth Day will be held. As our guide for the journey we have chosen the Beatitudes. Last year we reflected on the beatitude of the poor in spirit, within the greater context of the Sermon on the Mount. Together we discovered the revolutionary meaning of the Beatitudes and the powerful summons of Jesus to embark courageously upon the exciting quest for happiness. This year we will reflect on the sixth beatitude: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Mt 5:8).

1. The desire for happiness

The word "blessed", or "happy", occurs nine times in this, Jesus' first great sermon (cf. Mt 5:1-12). It is like a refrain reminding us of the Lord's call to advance together with him on a road which, for all its many challenges, leads to true happiness.

Dear young friends, this search for happiness is shared by people of all times and all ages. God has placed in the heart of every man and woman an irrepressible desire for happiness, for fulfillment. Have you not noticed that your hearts are restless, always searching for a treasure which can satisfy their thirst for the infinite?

The first chapters of the Book of Genesis show us the splendid "beatitude" to which we are called. It consists in perfect communion with God, with others, with nature, and with ourselves. To approach God freely, to see him and to be close to him, was part of his plan for us from the beginning; his divine light was meant to illumine every human relationship with truth and transparency. In the state of original purity, there was no need to put on masks, to engage in ploys or to attempt to conceal ourselves from one another. Everything was clear and pure.

When Adam and Eve yielded to temptation and broke off this relationship of trusting communion with God, sin entered into human history (cf. Gen 3). The effects were immediately evident, within themselves, in their relationship with each other and with nature. And how dramatic the effects are! Our original purity as defiled. From that time on, we were no longer capable of closeness to God. Men and women began to conceal themselves, to cover their nakedness. Lacking the light which comes from seeing the Lord, they saw everything around them in a distorted fashion, myopically. The inner compass which had guided them in their quest for happiness lost its point of reference, and the attractions of power, wealth, possessions, and a desire for pleasure at all costs, led them to the abyss of sorrow and anguish.

In the Psalms we hear the heartfelt plea which mankind makes to God: "What can bring us happiness? Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord" (Ps 4:7). The Father, in his infinite goodness, responded to this plea by sending his Son. In Jesus, God has taken on a human face. Through his Incarnation, life, death and resurrection, Jesus frees us from sin and opens new and hitherto unimaginable horizons.

Dear young men and women, in Christ you find fulfilled your every desire for goodness and happiness. He alone can satisfy your deepest longings, which are so often clouded by deceptive worldly promises. As Saint John Paul II said: "He is the beauty to which you are so attracted; it is he who provokes you with that thirst for fullness that will not let you settle for compromise; it is he who urges you to shed the masks of a false life; it is he who reads in your hearts your most genuine choices, the choices that others try to stifle. It is Jesus who stirs in you the desire to do something great with your lives" (cf. Discourse at the Prayer Vigil at Tor Vergata, 19 August 2000: *Insegnamenti* XXIII/2, [2000], 212).

2. Blessed are the pure in heart...

Let us now try to understand more fully how this blessedness comes about through purity of heart. First of all, we need to appreciate the biblical meaning of the word heart. In Hebrew thought, the heart is the centre of the emotions, thoughts and intentions of the human person. Since the Bible teaches us that God does not look to appearances, but to the heart (cf. 1 Sam 16:7), we can also say that it is from the heart that we see God. This is because the heart is really the human being in his or her totality as a unity of body and soul, in his or her ability to love and to be loved.

As for the definition of the word pure, however, the Greek word used by the evangelist Matthew is *katharos*, which basically means clean, pure, undefiled. In the Gospel we see Jesus reject a certain conception of ritual purity bound to exterior practices, one which forbade all contact with things and people (including lepers and strangers) considered impure. To the Pharisees who, like so many Jews of their time, ate nothing without first performing ritual ablutions and observing the many traditions associated with cleansing vessels, Jesus responds categorically: "There is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness" (Mk 7:15, 21-22).

In what, then, does the happiness born of a pure heart consist? From Jesus' list of the evils which make someone impure, we see that the question has to do above all with the area of our relationships. Each one of us must learn to discern what can "defile" his or her heart and to form his or her conscience rightly and sensibly, so as to be capable of "discerning the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:2). We need to show a healthy concern for creation, for the purity of our air, water and food, but how much more do we need to protect the purity of what is most precious of all: our heart and our relationships. This "human ecology" will help us to breathe the pure air that comes from beauty, from true love, and from holiness.

Once I asked you the question: "Where is your treasure? In what does your heart find its rest?" (cf. Interview with Young People from Belgium, 31 March 2014). Our hearts can be attached to true or false treasures, they can find genuine rest or they can simply slumber, becoming lazy and lethargic. The greatest good we can have in life is our relationship with God. Are you convinced of this? Do you realize how much you are worth in the eyes of God? Do you know that you are loved and welcomed by him unconditionally, as indeed you are? Once we lose our sense of this, we human beings become an incomprehensible enigma, for it is the knowledge that we are loved unconditionally by God which gives meaning to our lives. Do you remember the conversation that Jesus had with the rich young man (cf. Mk 10:17-22)? The evangelist Mark observes that the Lord looked upon him and loved him (v. 21), and invited him to follow him and thus to find true riches. I hope, dear young friends, that this loving gaze of Christ will accompany each of you throughout life.

Youth is a time of life when your desire for a love which is genuine, beautiful and expansive begins to blossom in your hearts. How powerful is this ability to love and to be loved! Do not let this precious treasure be debased, destroyed or spoiled. That is what happens when we start to use our neighbours for our own selfish ends, even as objects of pleasure. Hearts are broken and sadness follows upon these negative experiences. I urge you: Do not be afraid of true love, the love that Jesus teaches us and which Saint Paul describes as "patient and kind". Paul says: "Love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor 13:4-8).

In encouraging you to rediscover the beauty of the human vocation to love, I also urge you to rebel against the widespread tendency to reduce love to something banal, reducing it to its sexual aspect alone, deprived of its essential characteristics of beauty, communion, fidelity and responsibility. Dear young friends, “in a culture of relativism and the ephemeral, many preach the importance of ‘enjoying’ the moment. They say that it is not worth making a life-long commitment, making a definitive decision, ‘for ever’, because we do not know what tomorrow will bring. I ask you, instead, to be revolutionaries, I ask you to swim against the tide; yes, I am asking you to rebel against this culture that sees everything as temporary and that ultimately believes you are incapable of responsibility, that believes you are incapable of true love. I have confidence in you and I pray for you. Have the courage to ‘swim against the tide’. And also have the courage to be happy” (Meeting with the Volunteers of the XXVIII World Youth Day, 28 July 2013).

You young people are brave adventurers! If you allow yourselves to discover the rich teachings of the Church on love, you will discover that Christianity does not consist of a series of prohibitions which stifle our desire for happiness, but rather a project for life capable of captivating our hearts.

3. ...for they shall see God

In the heart of each man and woman, the Lord’s invitation constantly resounds: “Seek my face!” (Ps 27:8). At the same time, we must always realize that we are poor sinners. For example, we read in the Book of Psalms: “Who can climb the mountain of the Lord? Who shall stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart” (Ps 24:3-4). But we must never be afraid or discouraged: throughout the Bible and in the history of each one of us we see that it is always God who takes the first step. He purifies us so that we can come into his presence.

When the prophet Isaiah heard the Lord’s call to speak in his name, he was terrified and said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips” (Is 6:5). And yet the Lord purified him, sending to him an angel who touched his lips, saying: “Your guilt is taken away, and your sin is forgiven” (v. 7). In the New Testament, when on the shores of lake Genesaret Jesus called his first disciples and performed the sign of the miraculous catch of fish, Simon Peter fell at his feet, exclaiming: “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Lk 5:8). Jesus’ reply was immediate: “Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be fishers of men” (v. 10). And when one of the disciples of Jesus asked him: “Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied”, the Master replied: “He who has seen me has seen the Father (Jn 14:8-9).

The Lord’s invitation to encounter him is made to each of you, in whatever place or situation you find yourself. It suffices to have the desire for “a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter you; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day” (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 3). We are all sinners, needing to be purified by the Lord. But it is enough to take a small step towards Jesus to realize that he awaits us always with open arms, particularly in the sacrament of Reconciliation, a privileged opportunity to encounter that divine mercy which purifies us and renews our hearts.

Dear young people, the Lord wants to meet us, to let himself “be seen” by us. “And how?”, you might ask me. Saint Teresa of Avila, born in Spain five hundred years ago, even as a young girl, said to her parents, “I want to see God”. She subsequently discovered the way of prayer as “an intimate friendship with the One who makes us feel loved” (Autobiography, 8,5). So my question to you is this: “Are you praying?” Do you know that you can speak with Jesus, with the Father, with the Holy Spirit, as you speak to a friend? And not just any friend, but the greatest and most trusted of your friends! You will discover what one of his parishioners told the Curé of Ars: “When I pray before the tabernacle, ‘I look at him, and he looks at me’” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2715).

Once again I invite you to encounter the Lord by frequently reading sacred Scripture. If you are not already in the habit of doing so, begin with the Gospels. Read a line or two each day. Let God's word speak to your heart and enlighten your path (cf. Ps 119:105). You will discover that God can be "seen" also in the face of your brothers and sisters, especially those who are most forgotten: the poor, the hungry, those who thirst, strangers, the sick, those imprisoned (cf. Mt 25:31-46). Have you ever had this experience? Dear young people, in order to enter into the logic of the Kingdom of Heaven, we must recognize that we are poor with the poor. A pure heart is necessarily one which has been stripped bare, a heart that knows how to bend down and share its life with those most in need.

Encountering God in prayer, the reading of the Bible and in the fraternal life will help you better to know the Lord and yourselves. Like the disciples on the way to Emmaus (cf. Lk 24:13-35), the Lord's voice will make your hearts burn within you. He will open your eyes to recognize his presence and to discover the loving plan he has for your life.

Some of you feel, or will soon feel, the Lord's call to married life, to forming a family. Many people today think that this vocation is "outdated", but that is not true! For this very reason, the ecclesial community has been engaged in a special period of reflection on the vocation and the mission of the family in the Church and the contemporary world. I also ask you to consider whether you are being called to the consecrated life or the priesthood. How beautiful it is to see young people who embrace the call to dedicate themselves fully to Christ and to the service of his Church! Challenge yourselves, and with a pure heart do not be afraid of what God is asking of you! From your "yes" to the Lord's call, you will become new seeds of hope in the Church and in society. Never forget: God's will is our happiness!

4. On the way to Krakow

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Mt 5:8). Dear young men and women, as you see, this beatitude speaks directly to your lives and is a guarantee of your happiness. So once more I urge you: Have the courage to be happy!

This year's World Youth Day begins the final stage of preparations for the great gathering of young people from around the world in Krakow in 2016. Thirty years ago Saint John Paul II instituted World Youth Days in the Church. This pilgrimage of young people from every continent under the guidance of the Successor of Peter has truly been a providential and prophetic initiative. Together let us thank the Lord for the precious fruits which these World Youth Days have produced in the lives of countless young people in every part of the globe! How many amazing discoveries have been made, especially the discovery that Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life! How many people have realized that the Church is a big and welcoming family! How many conversions, how many vocations have these gatherings produced! May the saintly Pope, the Patron of World Youth Day, intercede on behalf of our pilgrimage toward his beloved Krakow. And may the maternal gaze of the Blessed Virgin Mary, full of grace, all-beautiful and all-pure, accompany us at every step along the way.

From the Vatican, 31 January 2015

Memorial of Saint John Bosco

FRANCIS