

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
FOR THE XXXVI WORLD YOUTH DAY
21 NOVEMBER 2021

“STAND UP. I APPOINT YOU AS A WITNESS OF WHAT YOU HAVE SEEN.”
(cf. ACTS 26:16)

DEAR YOUNG PEOPLE,

Once again I would like to take you by the hand and walk with you on the spiritual pilgrimage that leads to the 2023 World Youth Day in Lisbon.

Last year’s Message, which I signed shortly before the pandemic broke out, had as its theme: “Young man, I say to you, arise!” (cf. *Lk* 7:14). In his providence, the Lord was already preparing us for the grave challenge we were about to experience.

Everywhere in the world, we suffered the loss of so many of our dear ones and experienced social isolation. The health emergency was a particular setback for you young people, for your life is naturally directed outwards: to school or university, to work and social gatherings. You found yourselves in difficult situations that you were not used to facing. Those who found it harder, or lacked support, felt disoriented. We saw a rise in family problems, unemployment, depression, loneliness and addictive behaviour, to say nothing of growing stress, tensions, outbursts of anger and increased violence.

Yet, thank God, this was only one side of the coin. The experience showed us our fragility, but it also revealed our virtues, including our inclination to solidarity. All over the world, we saw great numbers of individuals, including many young people, helping to save lives, sowing seeds of hope, upholding freedom and justice, and acting as peacemakers and bridge builders.

Whenever a young person falls, in some sense all humanity falls. Yet it is also true that when a young person rises, it is as if the whole world rises as well. Young people, what great potential you have in your hands! What great strength you have in your hearts!

Today too, God is saying to each one of you: “Arise!” I fervently hope that this Message may help us prepare for new times and a new page in the history of humanity. Yet we cannot begin anew without you, dear young people. If our world is to arise, it needs your strength, your enthusiasm, your passion. I would like, then, to meditate with you on the passage of the Acts of the Apostles where Jesus says to Saint Paul: “Arise! I have appointed you to testify to what you have seen” (cf. *Acts* 26:16).

PAUL’S WITNESS BEFORE THE KING

The verse that has inspired the theme of the 2021 World Youth Day is taken from the testimony of Paul before King Agrippa following his imprisonment. Paul, formerly the enemy

and persecutor of Christians, is now on trial precisely for his faith in Christ. Some twenty-five years later, the apostle recounted the story of his fateful encounter with Christ.

Paul states that he persecuted Christians, until one day while travelling to Damascus to arrest some of them, a light “brighter than the sun” shone around him and his companions (cf. *Acts* 26:13). He alone, however, heard “a voice”: the voice of Jesus who spoke to him, calling him by name.

SAUL! SAUL!

Let us take a closer look at this event. By calling Saul by name, the Lord made him realize that he knew him personally. It was as if he said: “I know who you are and what you are up to; even so, I am speaking directly to you”. Twice, the Lord calls Paul by name as the sign of an important special vocation; so he had earlier done with Moses (cf. *Ex* 3:4) and Samuel (cf. *1 Sam* 3:10). Falling to the ground, Saul realizes that he is witnessing a theophany, a powerful divine revelation that throws him into confusion, but does not destroy him. Instead, he finds himself called by name.

Only a personal and non-anonymous encounter with Christ changes lives. Jesus shows that he knows Saul very well, “inside out”. Even though Saul is a persecutor, even though his heart is full of hatred for Christians, Jesus realizes that this is due to ignorance. He wants to show in him his mercy. This grace, this unmerited and unconditional love, will be the light that radically transforms Saul’s life.

WHO ARE YOU, LORD?

Before this mysterious presence calling out his name, Saul asks: “Who are you, Lord?” (*Acts* 26:15) This question is decisive, and sooner or later all of us have to ask it. It is not enough to hear other people speak about Jesus; we need to speak to him ourselves, personally. Deep down, this is what prayer is all about. Prayer means talking directly with Jesus, even though our heart may still be confused and our mind full of doubts or even contempt for Christ and Christians. I pray that every young person, in the depths of his or her heart, will eventually ask the question: “Who are you, Lord?”

We can no longer assume that everyone knows Jesus, even in the age of the internet. The question that many people are asking of Jesus and his Church is precisely this: “Who are you?” In the entire story of Saint Paul’s calling, this is the only time in which he, Paul, speaks. And the Lord immediately replies: “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting” (ibid.).

“I AM JESUS, WHOM YOU ARE PERSECUTING!”

With this answer, Jesus reveals to Saul a great mystery: that he sees himself as one with the Church, with Christians. Up to that point, Saul had seen nothing of Christ, but only the faithful whom he had cast into prison (cf. *Acts* 26:10) and in whose killing he had consented (ibid.). He had seen how Christians responded to evil with goodness, hatred with love, enduring injustice,

violence, calumnies and persecutions for the name of Christ. In some way, without knowing it, Saul had already encountered Christ. He had encountered him in Christians!

How many times have we heard it said “Jesus yes, the Church no!”, as if one could be an alternative to the other. One cannot know Jesus if one does not know the Church. One cannot know Jesus apart from the brothers and sisters in his community. We cannot call ourselves fully Christian unless we experience faith’s ecclesial dimension.

“IT HURTS YOU TO KICK AGAINST THE GOADS”

With these words, the Lord speaks to Saul after he had fallen to the ground. Yet for some time he had no doubt been mysteriously repeating those same words to Saul, in an attempt to draw him to himself. Saul, however, had resisted. Our Lord addresses that same gentle “reproach” to every young person who turns away from him: “How long will you flee from me? Why can’t you hear me calling you? I am waiting for you to come back to me”. There are times when we too say, like the prophet Jeremiah: “I will no longer think about him” (cf. *Jer* 20:9). Yet a fire burns in every person’s heart: even if we try to stifle it, we will not succeed, because it is stronger than we are.

The Lord chose someone who was persecuting him, completely hostile to him and his followers. We see that, in God’s eyes, no one is lost. Thanks to a personal encounter with him, we can always start over again. No young person is ever beyond the reach of God’s grace and mercy. Of no one can we say: He’s too far gone... It’s too late... How many young people passionately rebel and go against the grain, while deep in their hearts they feel a need to be committed, to love with all their heart, to have a mission in life! In the young Saul, Jesus saw exactly that.

RECOGNIZING OUR BLINDNESS

We can imagine that, before his encounter with Christ, Saul was to some extent “full of himself”, thinking he was “great” on the basis of his moral integrity, zeal, background and education. Certainly, he was convinced of being right. Once the Lord reveals himself, Saul “falls to the ground”, blinded. Suddenly, he is unable to see, both physically and spiritually. His certainties are shaken. In his heart, he realizes that his passionate zeal to kill Christians was utterly wrong. He realizes that he does not possess absolute truth, and is indeed far from it. His certainties and his pride dissipate; suddenly he finds himself disoriented, weak and “small”.

Such humility – the awareness of our limitations – is essential! Those who are convinced that they know everything about themselves, other persons and even religious truths, will find it hard to encounter Christ. Saul, once blinded, lost his reference points. Alone in darkness, the only clear things were the light he saw and the voice he heard. How paradoxical! Only when we are blinded, do we start to see!

After his overpowering experience on the road to Damascus, Saul preferred to be called Paul, a name that means “small”. This was not like those nicknames or made-up names so common today. His encounter with Christ changed his life; it made him feel truly small and tore

down everything preventing him from truly coming to know himself. As he tells us: “I became the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God” (1 *Cor* 15:9).

Saint Therese of Lisieux, like so many other saints, loved to say that humility is truth. Nowadays we fill up our time, especially on social media, with any number of “stories”, often carefully constructed with backdrops, web cameras and special effects. More and more, we want to be in the spotlight, perfectly framed, ready to show our “friends” and “followers” an image of ourselves that does not reflect who we really are. Christ, the noonday sun, comes to enlighten us and to restore our authenticity, freeing us from all our masks. He shows us clearly who we are, for that is exactly how he loves us.

CHANGING PERSPECTIVE

Paul’s conversion did not involve turning back, but being open to a completely new way of seeing things. He continued on his journey to Damascus, but something had changed; now he was a different person (cf. *Acts* 22:10). Conversion can renew our everyday lives. We continue to do what we did before, but our hearts and motives are now changed. In the case of Paul, Jesus told him to continue on to Damascus, where he had originally been going. Paul obeyed, but the goal and purpose of his journey were radically altered. From this point on, Paul will view things with new eyes, no longer as a persecutor and executioner, but as a disciple and a witness. In Damascus, Ananias will baptize him and present him to the Christian community. In silence and prayer, Paul would deepen his experience and the new identity bestowed on him by the Lord Jesus.

DO NOT DISSIPATE THE STRENGTH AND PASSION OF YOUTH

Paul’s attitude prior to his encounter with the risen Jesus is not so strange for us. How much strength and passion also well up in your own hearts, dear young people! Yet the darkness around and inside you can prevent you from seeing things rightly. You can risk finding yourselves lost in fighting meaningless and even violent battles. Sadly, the first victims will be yourselves and those closest to you. There is also the danger of fighting for causes that begin by upholding just values, but once carried to extremes, turn into destructive ideologies. How many young people today inspired, perhaps driven, by political or religious convictions, end up becoming instruments of violence and destruction in the lives of many others! Some, moving with ease in the digital world, use virtual reality and social networks as a new battlefield, unscrupulously employing the weapon of fake news to spread venom and to wipe out their adversaries.

When the Lord broke into Paul’s life, he did not suppress his personality or passionate zeal. Instead, he brought those gifts of his to full flower by making him a great herald of the Gospel to the very ends of the earth.

THE APOSTLE OF THE NATIONS

Henceforth, Paul would be called the “apostle of the nations”. Paul, who had been a Pharisee, a scrupulous follower of the Law! Here we see yet another paradox: the Lord putting

his trust in the very one who had persecuted him. Like Paul, each of us can hear a voice in our heart saying: “I trust you. I know your story and I lay hold of it, together with you. Even if you have often been against me, I choose you and make you my witness”. God’s ways of thinking can turn the worst persecutor into a great witness.

Christ’s disciples are called to be “the light of the world” (*Mt 5:14*). Paul must now testify to what he saw, but for the time being he is blind. Another paradox! Yet by virtue of his personal experience, Paul can fully identify with those to whom the Lord will send him. That was why he was made a witness: “to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light” (*Acts 26:18*).

“ARISE AND BEAR WITNESS!”

When we embrace the new life bestowed on us in baptism, the Lord gives us an important and life-changing mission: “You are to be my witness!”

Today Christ speaks to you the same words that he spoke to Paul: Arise! Do not remain downcast or caught up in yourself: a mission awaits you! You too can testify to what Jesus has begun to accomplish in your lives. In Jesus’ name, I ask you:

- Arise! Testify that you too were blind and encountered the light. You too have seen God’s goodness and beauty in yourself, in others and in the communion of the Church, where all loneliness is overcome.

- Arise! Testify to the love and respect it is possible to instill in human relationships, in the lives of our families, in the dialogue between parents and children, between the young and the elderly.

- Arise! Uphold social justice, truth and integrity, human rights. Protect the persecuted, the poor and the vulnerable, those who have no voice in society, immigrants.

- Arise! Testify to the new way of looking at things that enables you to view creation with eyes brimming with wonder, that makes you see the Earth as our common home, and gives you the courage to promote an integral ecology.

- Arise! Testify that lives of failure can be rebuilt, that persons spiritually dead can rise anew, that those in bondage can once more be free, that hearts overwhelmed by sorrow can rediscover hope.

- Arise! Testify joyfully that Christ is alive! Spread his message of love and salvation among your contemporaries, at school and in the university, at work, in the digital world, everywhere.

The Lord, the Church and the Pope trust you and appoint you to bear witness before all those other young people whom you will encounter on today’s “roads to Damascus”. Never forget that “anyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love. Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus” (*Evangeliu Gaudium*, 120).

ARISE AND CELEBRATE WYD IN THE PARTICULAR CHURCHES!

Once again, I invite all of you, young people throughout the world, to take part in this spiritual pilgrimage leading to the celebration of the 2023 World Youth Day in Lisbon. The next event, however, will take place in your particular Churches, in the different dioceses and eparchies of the world, where the 2021 World Youth Day will be celebrated locally, on the Solemnity of Christ the King.

I hope that all of us can experience these steps along the way as true pilgrims, and not merely as “religious tourists”! May we be increasingly open to God’s surprises, for he wants to light up our path. May we be more and more open to hearing his voice, also through the voices of our brothers and sisters. In this way, we will help one another to arise together and, at this troubled time in our history, we will become the prophets of a new and hope-filled future! May the Blessed Virgin Mary intercede for all of us.

Rome, Saint John Lateran, 14 September 2021,
Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

Franciscus