

“Rejoice in the Lord always” (Phil 4:4)

Dear young friends,

I am happy to address you once more on the occasion of the 27th World Youth Day. The memory of our meeting in Madrid last August remains close to my heart. It was a time of extraordinary grace when God showered his blessings on the young people gathered from all over the world. I give thanks to God for all the fruits which that event bore, fruits which will surely multiply for young people and their communities in the future. Now we are looking forward to our next meeting in Rio de Janeiro in 2013, whose theme will be: “Go and make disciples of all nations!” (cf. Mt 28:19).

This year’s World Youth Day theme comes from Saint Paul’s exhortation in his Letter to the Philippians: “Rejoice in the Lord always” (4:4). Joy is at the heart of Christian experience. At each World Youth Day we experience immense joy, the joy of communion, the joy of being Christian, the joy of faith. This is one of the marks of these gatherings. We can see the great attraction that joy exercises. In a world of sorrow and anxiety, joy is an important witness to the beauty and reliability of the Christian faith.

The Church’s vocation is to bring joy to the world, a joy that is authentic and enduring, the joy proclaimed by the angels to the shepherds on the night Jesus was born (cf. Lk 2:10). Not only did God speak, not only did he accomplish great signs throughout the history of humankind, but he drew so near to us that he became one of us and lived our life completely. In these difficult times, so many young people all around you need to hear that the Christian message is a message of joy and hope! I would like to reflect with you on this joy and on how to find it, so that you can experience it more deeply and bring it to everyone you meet.

1. Our hearts are made for joy

A yearning for joy lurks within the heart of every man and woman. Far more than immediate and fleeting feelings of satisfaction, our hearts seek a perfect, full and lasting joy capable of giving “flavour” to our existence. This is particularly true for you, because youth is a time of continuous discovery of life, of the world, of others and of ourselves. It is a time of openness to the future and of great longing for happiness, friendship, sharing and truth, a time when we are moved by high ideals and make great plans.

Each day is filled with countless simple joys which are the Lord’s gift: the joy of living, the joy of seeing nature’s beauty, the joy of a job well done, the joy of helping others, the joy of sincere

and pure love. If we look carefully, we can see many other reasons to rejoice. There are the happy times in family life, shared friendship, the discovery of our talents, our successes, the compliments we receive from others, the ability to express ourselves and to know that we are understood, and the feeling of being of help to others. There is also the excitement of learning new things, seeing new and broader horizons open up through our travels and encounters, and realizing the possibilities we have for charting our future. We might also mention the experience of reading a great work of literature, of admiring a masterpiece of art, of listening to or playing music, or of watching a film. All these things can bring us real joy.

Yet each day we also face any number of difficulties. Deep down we also worry about the future; we begin to wonder if the full and lasting joy for which we long might be an illusion and an escape from reality. Many young people ask themselves: is perfect joy really possible? The quest for joy can follow various paths, and some of these turn out to be mistaken, if not dangerous. How can we distinguish things that give real and lasting joy from immediate and illusory pleasures? How can we find true joy in life, a joy that endures and does not forsake us at moments of difficulty?

2. God is the source of true joy

Whatever brings us true joy, whether the small joys of each day or the greatest joys in life, has its source in God, even if this does not seem immediately obvious. This is because God is a communion of eternal love, he is infinite joy that does not remain closed in on itself, but expands to embrace all whom God loves and who love him. God created us in his image out of love, in order to shower his love upon us and to fill us with his presence and grace. God wants us to share in his own divine and eternal joy, and he helps us to see that the deepest meaning and value of our lives lie in being accepted, welcomed and loved by him. Whereas we sometimes find it hard to accept others, God offers us an unconditional acceptance which enables us to say: "I am loved; I have a place in the world and in history; I am personally loved by God. If God accepts me and loves me and I am sure of this, then I know clearly and with certainty that it is a good thing that I am alive".

God's infinite love for each of us is fully seen in Jesus Christ. The joy we are searching for is to be found in him. We see in the Gospel how the events at the beginning of Jesus' life are marked by joy. When the Archangel Gabriel tells the Virgin Mary that she is to be the mother of the Saviour, his first word is "Rejoice!" (Lk 1:28). When Jesus is born, the angel of the Lord says to the shepherds: "Behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a Saviour has been born for you, who is Messiah and Lord" (Lk 2:10-11). When the Magi came in search of the child, "they were overjoyed at seeing the star" (Mt 2:10). The cause of all this joy is the closeness of God who became one of us. This is what Saint Paul means when he writes to the Philippians: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall

say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near" (Phil 4:4-5). Our first reason for joy is the closeness of the Lord, who welcomes me and loves me.

An encounter with Jesus always gives rise to immense inner joy. We can see this in many of the Gospel stories. We recall when Jesus visited Zacchaeus, a dishonest tax collector and public sinner, he said to him: "Today I must stay at your house". Then, Saint Luke tells us, Zacchaeus "received him with joy" (Lk 19:5-6). This is the joy of meeting the Lord. It is the joy of feeling God's love, a love that can transform our whole life and bring salvation. Zacchaeus decides to change his life and to give half of his possessions to the poor.

At the hour of Jesus' passion, this love can be seen in all its power. At the end of his earthly life, while at supper with his friends, Jesus said: "As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love... I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete" (Jn 15:9,11). Jesus wants to lead his disciples and each one of us into the fullness of joy that he shares with the Father, so that the Father's love for him might abide in us (cf. Jn 17:26). Christian joy consists in being open to God's love and belonging to him.

The Gospels recount that Mary Magdalene and other women went to visit the tomb where Jesus had been laid after his death. An angel told them the astonishing news of Jesus' resurrection. Then, the Evangelist tells us, they ran from the sepulchre, "fearful yet overjoyed" to share the good news with the disciples. Jesus met them on the way and said: "Peace!" (Mt 28:8-9). They were being offered the joy of salvation. Christ is the One who lives and who overcame evil, sin and death. He is present among us as the Risen One and he will remain with us until the end of the world (cf. Mt 28:20). Evil does not have the last word in our lives; rather, faith in Christ the Saviour tells us that God's love is victorious.

This deep joy is the fruit of the Holy Spirit who makes us God's sons and daughters, capable of experiencing and savouring his goodness, and calling him "Abba", Father (cf. Rm 8:15). Joy is the sign of God's presence and action within us.

3. Preserving Christian joy in our hearts

At this point we wonder: "How do we receive and maintain this gift of deep, spiritual joy?"

One of the Psalms tells us: "Find your delight in the Lord who will give you your heart's desire" (Ps 37:4). Jesus told us that "the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field, which a

person finds and hides again, and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (Mt 13:44). The discovery and preservation of spiritual joy is the fruit of an encounter with the Lord. Jesus asks us to follow him and to stake our whole life on him. Dear young people, do not be afraid to risk your lives by making space for Jesus Christ and his Gospel. This is the way to find inner peace and true happiness. It is the way to live fully as children of God, created in his image and likeness.

Seek joy in the Lord: for joy is the fruit of faith. It is being aware of his presence and friendship every day: “the Lord is near!” (Phil 4:5). It is putting our trust in God, and growing in his knowledge and love. Shortly we shall begin the “Year of Faith”, and this will help and encourage us. Dear friends, learn to see how God is working in your lives and discover him hidden within the events of daily life. Believe that he is always faithful to the covenant which he made with you on the day of your Baptism. Know that God will never abandon you. Turn your eyes to him often. He gave his life for you on the cross because he loves you. Contemplation of this great love brings a hope and joy to our hearts that nothing can destroy. Christians can never be sad, for they have met Christ, who gave his life for them.

To seek the Lord and find him in our lives also means accepting his word, which is joy for our hearts. The Prophet Jeremiah wrote: “When I found your words, I devoured them; they became my joy and the happiness of my heart” (Jer 15:16). Learn to read and meditate on the sacred Scriptures. There you will find an answer to your deepest questions about truth. God’s word reveals the wonders that he has accomplished throughout human history, it fills us with joy, and it leads us to praise and adoration: “Come, let us sing joyfully to the Lord; let us kneel before the Lord who made us” (Ps 95:1,6).

The liturgy is a special place where the Church expresses the joy which she receives from the Lord and transmits it to the world. Each Sunday at Mass the Christian community celebrates the central mystery of salvation, which is the death and resurrection of Christ. This is a very important moment for all the Lord’s disciples because his sacrifice of love is made present. Sunday is the day when we meet the risen Christ, listen to his word, and are nourished by his body and blood. As we hear in one of the Psalms: “This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice in it and be glad” (Ps 118:24). At the Easter Vigil, the Church sings the Exultet, a hymn of joy for the victory of Jesus Christ over sin and death: “Sing, choirs of angels! ... Rejoice, O earth, in shining splendour ... Let this place resound with joy, echoing the mighty song of all God’s people!” Christian joy is born of this awareness of being loved by God who became man, gave his life for us and overcame evil and death. It means living a life of love for him. As Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus, a young Carmelite, wrote: “Jesus, my joy is loving you” (P 45, 21 January 1897).

4. The joy of love

Dear friends, joy is intimately linked to love. They are inseparable gifts of the Holy Spirit (cf. Gal 5:23). Love gives rise to joy, and joy is a form of love. Blessed Teresa of Calcutta drew on Jesus' words: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35) when she said: "Joy is a net of love by which you can catch souls; God loves a cheerful giver. Whoever gives with joy gives more". As the Servant of God Paul VI wrote: "In God himself, all is joy because all is giving" (Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete in Domino*, 9 May 1975).

In every area of your life, you should know that to love means to be steadfast, reliable and faithful to commitments. This applies most of all to friendship. Our friends expect us to be sincere, loyal and faithful because true love perseveres even in times of difficulty. The same thing can be said about your work and studies and the services you carry out. Fidelity and perseverance in doing good brings joy, even if not always immediately.

If we are to experience the joy of love, we must also be generous. We cannot be content to give the minimum. We need to be fully committed in life and to pay particular attention to those in need. The world needs men and women who are competent and generous, willing to be at the service of the common good. Make every effort to study conscientiously, to develop your talents and to put them at the service of others even now. Find ways to help make society more just and humane wherever you happen to be. May your entire life be guided by a spirit of service and not by the pursuit of power, material success and money.

Speaking of generosity, I would like to mention one particular joy. It is the joy we feel when we respond to the vocation to give our whole life to the Lord. Dear young people, do not be afraid if Christ is calling you to the religious, monastic or missionary life or to the priesthood. Be assured that he fills with joy all those who respond to his invitation to leave everything to be with him and to devote themselves with undivided heart to the service of others. In the same way, God gives great joy to men and women who give themselves totally to one another in marriage in order to build a family and to be signs of Christ's love for the Church.

Let me remind you of a third element that will lead you to the joy of love. It is allowing fraternal love to grow in your lives and in those of your communities. There is a close bond between communion and joy. It is not by chance that Saint Paul's exhortation: "Rejoice in the Lord always" (Phil 4:4) is written in the plural, addressing the community as a whole, rather than its individual members. Only when we are together in the communion of fellowship do we experience this joy. In the Acts of the Apostles, the first Christian community is described in these words: "Breaking bread in their homes, they ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart" (Acts 2:46). I ask you to make every effort to help our Christian communities to be special places of sharing, attention and concern for one another.

5. The joy of conversion

Dear friends, experiencing real joy also means recognizing the temptations that lead us away from it. Our present-day culture often pressures us to seek immediate goals, achievements and pleasures. It fosters fickleness more than perseverance, hard work and fidelity to commitments. The messages it sends push a consumerist mentality and promise false happiness. Experience teaches us that possessions do not ensure happiness. How many people are surrounded by material possessions yet their lives are filled with despair, sadness and emptiness! To have lasting joy we need to live in love and truth. We need to live in God.

God wants us to be happy. That is why he gave us specific directions for the journey of life: the commandments. If we observe them, we will find the path to life and happiness. At first glance, they might seem to be a list of prohibitions and an obstacle to our freedom. But if we study them more closely, we see in the light of Christ's message that the commandments are a set of essential and valuable rules leading to a happy life in accordance with God's plan. How often, on the other hand, do we see that choosing to build our lives apart from God and his will brings disappointment, sadness and a sense of failure. The experience of sin, which is the refusal to follow God and an affront to his friendship, brings gloom into our hearts.

At times the path of the Christian life is not easy, and being faithful to the Lord's love presents obstacles; occasionally we fall. Yet God in his mercy never abandons us; he always offers us the possibility of returning to him, being reconciled with him and experiencing the joy of his love which forgives and welcomes us back.

Dear young people, have frequent recourse to the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation! It is the sacrament of joy rediscovered. Ask the Holy Spirit for the light needed to acknowledge your sinfulness and to ask for God's forgiveness. Celebrate this sacrament regularly, with serenity and trust. The Lord will always open his arms to you. He will purify you and bring you into his joy: for there is joy in heaven even for one sinner who repents (cf. Lk 15:7).

6. Joy at times of trial

In the end, though, we might still wonder in our hearts whether it is really possible to live joyfully amid all life's trials, especially those which are most tragic and mysterious. We wonder whether following the Lord and putting our trust in him will always bring happiness.

We can find an answer in some of the experiences of young people like yourselves who have found in Christ the light that can give strength and hope even in difficult situations. Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati (1901-1925) experienced many trials during his short life, including a romantic experience that left him deeply hurt. In the midst of this situation he wrote to his sister: "You ask me if I am happy. How could I not be? As long as faith gives me strength, I am happy. A Catholic could not be other than happy... The goal for which we were created involves a path which has its thorns, but it is not a sad path. It is joy, even when it involves pain" (Letter to his sister Luciana, Turin, 14 February 1925). When Blessed John Paul II presented Blessed Pier Giorgio as a model for young people, he described him as "a young person with infectious joy, the joy that overcame many difficulties in his life" (Address to Young People, Turin, 13 April 1980).

Closer to us in time is Chiara Badano (1971-1990), who was recently beatified. She experienced how pain could be transfigured by love and mysteriously steeped in joy. At the age of eighteen, while suffering greatly from cancer, Chiara prayed to the Holy Spirit and interceded for the young people of the movement to which she belonged. As well as praying for her own cure, she asked God to enlighten all those young people by his Spirit and to give them wisdom and light. "It was really a moment of God's presence. I was suffering physically, but my soul was singing" (Letter to Chiara Lubich, Sassello, 20 December 1989). The key to her peace and joy was her complete trust in the Lord and the acceptance of her illness as a mysterious expression of his will for her sake and that of everyone. She often said: "Jesus, if you desire it, then I desire it too".

These are just two testimonies taken from any number of others which show that authentic Christians are never despairing or sad, not even when faced with difficult trials. They show that Christian joy is not a flight from reality, but a supernatural power that helps us to deal with the challenges of daily life. We know that the crucified and risen Christ is here with us and that he is a faithful friend always. When we share in his sufferings, we also share in his glory. With him and in him, suffering is transformed into love. And there we find joy (cf. Col 1:24).

7. Witnesses of joy

Dear friends, to conclude I would encourage you to be missionaries of joy. We cannot be happy if others are not. Joy has to be shared. Go and tell other young people about your joy at finding the precious treasure which is Jesus himself. We cannot keep the joy of faith to ourselves. If we are to keep it, we must give it away. Saint John said: "What we have seen and heard we proclaim now to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; we are writing this so that our joy may be complete" (1 Jn 1:3-4).

Christianity is sometimes depicted as a way of life that stifles our freedom and goes against our desires for happiness and joy. But this is far from the truth. Christians are men and women who are truly happy because they know that they are not alone. They know that God is always holding them in his hands. It is up to you, young followers of Christ, to show the world that faith brings happiness and a joy which is true, full and enduring. If the way Christians live at times appears dull and boring, you should be the first to show the joyful and happy side of faith. The Gospel is the “good news” that God loves us and that each of us is important to him. Show the world that this is true!

Be enthusiastic witnesses of the new evangelization! Go to those who are suffering and those who are searching, and give them the joy that Jesus wants to bestow. Bring it to your families, your schools and universities, and your workplaces and your friends, wherever you live. You will see how it is contagious. You will receive a hundredfold: the joy of salvation for yourselves, and the joy of seeing God’s mercy at work in the hearts of others. And when you go to meet the Lord on that last day, you will hear him say: “Well done, my good and faithful servant... Come, share your master’s joy” (Mt 25:21).

May the Blessed Virgin Mary accompany you on this journey. She welcomed the Lord within herself and proclaimed this in a song of praise and joy, the Magnificat: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour” (Lk 1:46-47). Mary responded fully to God’s love by devoting her life to him in humble and complete service. She is invoked as “Cause of our Joy” because she gave us Jesus. May she lead you to that joy which no one will ever be able to take away from you!

From the Vatican, 15 March 2012

BENEDICTUS PP. XVI