

MEETING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE AND SEMINARIANS

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Saint Joseph Seminary, Yonkers, New York

Saturday, 19 April 2008

*Your Eminence,
Dear Brother Bishops,
Dear Young Friends,*

“Proclaim the Lord Christ ... and always have your answer ready for people who ask the reason for the hope that is within you” (1 Pet 3:15). With these words from the *First Letter of Peter* I greet each of you with heartfelt affection. I thank Cardinal Egan for his kind words of welcome and I also thank the representatives chosen from among you for their gestures of welcome. To Bishop Walsh, Rector of Saint Joseph Seminary, staff and seminarians, I offer my special greetings and gratitude.

Young friends, I am very happy to have the opportunity to speak with you. Please pass on my warm greetings to your family members and relatives, and to the teachers and staff of the various schools, colleges and universities you attend. I know that many people have worked hard to ensure that our gathering could take place. I am most grateful to them all. Also, I wish to acknowledge your singing to me Happy Birthday! Thank you for this moving gesture; I give you all an “A plus” for your German pronunciation! This evening I wish to share with you some thoughts about being disciples of Jesus Christ — walking in the Lord’s footsteps, our own lives become a journey of hope.

In front of you are the images of six ordinary men and women who grew up to lead extraordinary lives. The Church honors them as Venerable, Blessed, or Saint: each responded to the Lord’s call to a life of charity and each served him here, in the alleys, streets and suburbs of New York. I am struck by what a remarkably diverse group they are: poor and rich, lay men and women - one a wealthy wife and mother - priests and sisters, immigrants from afar, the daughter of a Mohawk warrior father and Algonquin mother, another a Haitian slave, and a Cuban intellectual.

Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini, Saint John Neumann, Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, Venerable Pierre Toussaint, and Padre Felix Varela: any one of us could be among them, for there is no stereotype to this group, no single mold. Yet a closer look reveals that there are common elements. Inflamed with the love of Jesus, their lives became remarkable journeys of hope. For some, that meant leaving home and embarking on a pilgrim journey of thousands of miles. For each there was an act of abandonment to God, in the confidence that he is the final destination of every pilgrim. And all offered an outstretched hand of hope to those they encountered along the way, often awakening in them a life of faith. Through orphanages, schools and hospitals, by

befriending the poor, the sick and the marginalized, and through the compelling witness that comes from walking humbly in the footsteps of Jesus, these six people laid open the way of faith, hope and charity to countless individuals, including perhaps your own ancestors.

And what of today? Who bears witness to the Good News of Jesus on the streets of New York, in the troubled neighborhoods of large cities, in the places where the young gather, seeking someone in whom they can trust? God is our origin and our destination, and Jesus the way. The path of that journey twists and turns — just as it did for our saints — through the joys and the trials of ordinary, everyday life: within your families, at school or college, during your recreation activities, and in your parish communities. All these places are marked by the culture in which you are growing up. As young Americans you are offered many opportunities for personal development, and you are brought up with a sense of generosity, service and fairness. Yet you do not need me to tell you that there are also difficulties: activities and mindsets which stifle hope, pathways which seem to lead to happiness and fulfillment but in fact end only in confusion and fear.

My own years as a teenager were marred by a sinister regime that thought it had all the answers; its influence grew — infiltrating schools and civic bodies, as well as politics and even religion — before it was fully recognized for the monster it was. It banished God and thus became impervious to anything true and good. Many of your grandparents and great-grandparents will have recounted the horror of the destruction that ensued. Indeed, some of them came to America precisely to escape such terror.

Let us thank God that today many people of your generation are able to enjoy the liberties which have arisen through the extension of democracy and respect for human rights. Let us thank God for all those who strive to ensure that you can grow up in an environment that nurtures what is beautiful, good, and true: your parents and grandparents, your teachers and priests, those civic leaders who seek what is right and just.

The power to destroy does, however, remain. To pretend otherwise would be to fool ourselves. Yet, it never triumphs; it is defeated. This is the essence of the hope that defines us as Christians; and the Church recalls this most dramatically during the Easter Triduum and celebrates it with great joy in the season of Easter! The One who shows us the way beyond death is the One who shows us how to overcome destruction and fear: thus it is Jesus who is the true teacher of life (cf. *Spe Salvi*, 6). His death and resurrection mean that we can say to the Father “you have restored us to life!” (*Prayer after Communion*, Good Friday). And so, just a few weeks ago, during the beautiful Easter Vigil liturgy, it was not from despair or fear that we cried out to God for our world, but with hope-filled confidence: dispel the darkness of our heart! dispel the darkness of our minds! (cf. *Prayer at the Lighting of the Easter Candle*).

What might that darkness be? What happens when people, especially the most vulnerable, encounter a clenched fist of repression or manipulation rather than a hand of hope? A first group of examples pertains to the heart. Here, the dreams and longings that young people pursue can so easily be shattered or destroyed. I am thinking of those

affected by drug and substance abuse, homelessness and poverty, racism, violence, and degradation – especially of girls and women. While the causes of these problems are complex, all have in common a poisoned attitude of mind which results in people being treated as mere objects – a callousness of heart takes hold which first ignores, then ridicules, the God-given dignity of every human being. Such tragedies also point to what might have been and what could be, were there other hands – your hands – reaching out. I encourage you to invite others, especially the vulnerable and the innocent, to join you along the way of goodness and hope.

The second area of darkness – that which affects the mind – often goes unnoticed, and for this reason is particularly sinister. The manipulation of truth distorts our perception of reality, and tarnishes our imagination and aspirations. I have already mentioned the many liberties which you are fortunate enough to enjoy. The fundamental importance of freedom must be rigorously safeguarded. It is no surprise then that numerous individuals and groups vociferously claim their freedom in the public forum. Yet freedom is a delicate value. It can be misunderstood or misused so as to lead not to the happiness which we all expect it to yield, but to a dark arena of manipulation in which our understanding of self and the world becomes confused, or even distorted by those who have an ulterior agenda.

Have you noticed how often the call for freedom is made without ever referring to the truth of the human person? Some today argue that respect for freedom of the individual makes it wrong to seek truth, including the truth about what is good. In some circles to speak of truth is seen as controversial or divisive, and consequently best kept in the private sphere. And in truth's place – or better said its absence – an idea has spread which, in giving value to everything indiscriminately, claims to assure freedom and to liberate conscience. This we call relativism. But what purpose has a “freedom” which, in disregarding truth, pursues what is false or wrong? How many young people have been offered a hand which in the name of freedom or experience has led them to addiction, to moral or intellectual confusion, to hurt, to a loss of self-respect, even to despair and so tragically and sadly to the taking of their own life? Dear friends, truth is not an imposition. Nor is it simply a set of rules. It is a discovery of the One who never fails us; the One whom we can always trust. In seeking truth we come to live by belief because ultimately truth is a person: Jesus Christ. That is why authentic freedom is not an opting out. It is an opting in; nothing less than letting go of self and allowing oneself to be drawn into Christ's very being for others (cf. *Spe Salvi*, 28).

How then can we as believers help others to walk the path of freedom which brings fulfillment and lasting happiness? Let us again turn to the saints. How did their witness truly free others from the darkness of heart and mind? The answer is found in the kernel of their faith; the kernel of our faith. The Incarnation, the birth of Jesus, tells us that God does indeed find a place among us. Though the inn is full, he enters through the stable, and there are people who see his light. They recognize Herod's dark closed world for what it is, and instead follow the bright guiding star of the night sky. And what shines forth? Here you might recall the prayer uttered on the most holy night of Easter: “Father we share in the light of your glory through your Son the light of the world ... inflame us

with your hope!” (*Blessing of the Fire*). And so, in solemn procession with our lighted candles we pass the light of Christ among us. It is “the light which dispels all evil, washes guilt away, restores lost innocence, brings mourners joy, casts out hatred, brings us peace, and humbles earthly pride” (*Exsultet*). This is Christ’s light at work. This is the way of the saints. It is a magnificent vision of hope – Christ’s light beckons you to be guiding stars for others, walking Christ’s way of forgiveness, reconciliation, humility, joy and peace.

At times, however, we are tempted to close in on ourselves, to doubt the strength of Christ’s radiance, to limit the horizon of hope. Take courage! Fix your gaze on our saints. The diversity of their experience of God’s presence prompts us to discover anew the breadth and depth of Christianity. Let your imaginations soar freely along the limitless expanse of the horizons of Christian discipleship. Sometimes we are looked upon as people who speak only of prohibitions. Nothing could be further from the truth! Authentic Christian discipleship is marked by a sense of wonder. We stand before the God we know and love as a friend, the vastness of his creation, and the beauty of our Christian faith.

Dear friends, the example of the saints invites us, then, to consider four essential aspects of the treasure of our faith: personal prayer and silence, liturgical prayer, charity in action, and vocations.

What matters most is that you develop your personal relationship with God. That relationship is expressed in prayer. God by his very nature speaks, hears, and replies. Indeed, Saint Paul reminds us: we can and should “pray constantly” (*1 Thess 5:17*). Far from turning in on ourselves or withdrawing from the ups and downs of life, by praying we turn towards God and through him to each other, including the marginalized and those following ways other than God’s path (cf. *Spe Salvi*, 33). As the saints teach us so vividly, prayer becomes hope in action. Christ was their constant companion, with whom they conversed at every step of their journey for others.

There is another aspect of prayer which we need to remember: silent contemplation. Saint John, for example, tells us that to embrace God’s revelation we must first listen, then respond by proclaiming what we have heard and seen (cf. *1 Jn 1:2-3*; *Dei Verbum*, 1). Have we perhaps lost something of the art of listening? Do you leave space to hear God’s whisper, calling you forth into goodness? Friends, do not be afraid of silence or stillness, listen to God, adore him in the Eucharist. Let his word shape your journey as an unfolding of holiness.

In the liturgy we find the whole Church at prayer. The word liturgy means the participation of God’s people in “the work of Christ the Priest and of His Body which is the Church” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7). What is that work? First of all it refers to Christ’s Passion, his Death and Resurrection, and his Ascension – what we call the Paschal Mystery. It also refers to the celebration of the liturgy itself. The two meanings are in fact inseparably linked because this “work of Jesus” is the real content of the liturgy. Through the liturgy, the “work of Jesus” is continually brought into contact with

history; with our lives in order to shape them. Here we catch another glimpse of the grandeur of our Christian faith. Whenever you gather for Mass, when you go to Confession, whenever you celebrate any of the sacraments, Jesus is at work. Through the Holy Spirit, he draws you to himself, into his sacrificial love of the Father which becomes love for all. We see then that the Church's liturgy is a ministry of hope for humanity. Your faithful participation, is an active hope which helps to keep the world – saints and sinners alike – open to God; this is the truly human hope we offer everyone (cf. *Spe Salvi*, 34).

Your personal prayer, your times of silent contemplation, and your participation in the Church's liturgy, bring you closer to God and also prepare you to serve others. The saints accompanying us this evening show us that the life of faith and hope is also a life of charity. Contemplating Jesus on the Cross we see love in its most radical form. We can begin to imagine the path of love along which we must move (cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, 12). The opportunities to make this journey are abundant. Look about you with Christ's eyes, listen with his ears, feel and think with his heart and mind. Are you ready to give all as he did for truth and justice? Many of the examples of the suffering which our saints responded to with compassion are still found here in this city and beyond. And new injustices have arisen: some are complex and stem from the exploitation of the heart and manipulation of the mind; even our common habitat, the earth itself, groans under the weight of consumerist greed and irresponsible exploitation. We must listen deeply. We must respond with a renewed social action that stems from the universal love that knows no bounds. In this way, we ensure that our works of mercy and justice become hope in action for others.

Dear young people, finally I wish to share a word about vocations. First of all my thoughts go to your parents, grandparents and godparents. They have been your primary educators in the faith. By presenting you for baptism, they made it possible for you to receive the greatest gift of your life. On that day you entered into the holiness of God himself. You became adoptive sons and daughters of the Father. You were incorporated into Christ. You were made a dwelling place of his Spirit. Let us pray for mothers and fathers throughout the world, particularly those who may be struggling in any way – socially, materially, spiritually. Let us honor the vocation of matrimony and the dignity of family life. Let us always appreciate that it is in families that vocations are given life.

Gathered here at Saint Joseph Seminary, I greet the seminarians present and indeed encourage all seminarians throughout America. I am glad to know that your numbers are increasing! The People of God look to you to be holy priests, on a daily journey of conversion, inspiring in others the desire to enter more deeply into the ecclesial life of believers. I urge you to deepen your friendship with Jesus the Good Shepherd. Talk heart to heart with him. Reject any temptation to ostentation, careerism, or conceit. Strive for a pattern of life truly marked by charity, chastity and humility, in imitation of Christ, the Eternal High Priest, of whom you are to become living icons (cf. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 33). Dear seminarians, I pray for you daily. Remember that what counts before the Lord is to dwell in his love and to make his love shine forth for others.

Religious Sisters, Brothers and Priests contribute greatly to the mission of the Church. Their prophetic witness is marked by a profound conviction of the primacy with which the Gospel shapes Christian life and transforms society. Today, I wish to draw your attention to the positive spiritual renewal which Congregations are undertaking in relation to their charism. The word charism means a gift freely and graciously given. Charisms are bestowed by the Holy Spirit, who inspires founders and foundresses, and shapes Congregations with a subsequent spiritual heritage. The wondrous array of charisms proper to each Religious Institute is an extraordinary spiritual treasury. Indeed, the history of the Church is perhaps most beautifully portrayed through the history of her schools of spirituality, most of which stem from the saintly lives of founders and foundresses. Through the discovery of charisms, which yield such a breadth of spiritual wisdom, I am sure that some of you young people will be drawn to a life of apostolic or contemplative service. Do not be shy to speak with Religious Brothers, Sisters or Priests about the charism and spirituality of their Congregation. No perfect community exists, but it is fidelity to a founding charism, not to particular individuals, that the Lord calls you to discern. Have courage! You too can make your life a gift of self for the love of the Lord Jesus and, in him, of every member of the human family (cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 3).

Friends, again I ask you, what about today? What are you seeking? What is God whispering to you? The hope which never disappoints is Jesus Christ. The saints show us the selfless love of his way. As disciples of Christ, their extraordinary journeys unfolded within the community of hope, which is the Church. It is from within the Church that you too will find the courage and support to walk the way of the Lord. Nourished by personal prayer, prompted in silence, shaped by the Church's liturgy you will discover the particular vocation God has for you. Embrace it with joy. You are Christ's disciples today. Shine his light upon this great city and beyond. Show the world the reason for the hope that resonates within you. Tell others about the truth that sets you free. With these sentiments of great hope in you I bid you farewell, until we meet again in Sydney this July for World Youth Day! And as a pledge of my love for you and your families, I gladly impart my Apostolic Blessing.