

YOUTH, ICON OF THE CHURCH

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World Youth Days are becoming more and more important in the life of the Church.

The number of participants in the celebrations has acquired gigantic proportions with the participation of nearly one million youths in the 1997 event in Paris. Previous World Youth Days were celebrated in Rome (1985), Buenos Aires (1987); Compostela, (1989); Czestochova, (1991); Denver, (1993); Manila, (1995); and Paris, (1997).

In this year's message to youth, the Pope calls youth "living icons of the Church." Why is youth an icon of the Church? Let us examine how this can be so, and what the Church says about youth and to youth.

Youth icon of the Church

Icon is not originally a computer word but many people nowadays know the word "icon" from computers. You click the mouse at the right window and you get the "icon" of the program you want. But icon is essentially a religious word. It has special significance to the Orthodox. *"What the mystic has experienced of God be represented in the icon so that the Christian could glimpse something of the mystical experience in the icons. Icons were a focus of contemplation (Theoria) which provided the faithful with a sort of window of the divine word. Christ, the Logos, was the icon of God par excellence. Icons were expressive of the silence of God, exhibiting in themselves the ineffability of a mystery that transcends being. Without ceasing and without speech, they praise the goodness of God in that venerable and thrice-illuminated melody of theology."* (1)

Besides, the fact that youth is called a living icon of the Church in the Papal message to the 12th World Youth Day, words like "rejuvenate" and "youthfulness" are used in a variety of documents of the Church. Thus:

- **Christifideles Laici** (46) says: *"The Church beholds in youth a reflection of herself. The Church beholds in youth her call to that blessed youthfulness she constantly enjoys as a result of Christ's spirit"*.
- **Vatican II (Message to youth)** has defined youth as *"the hope of the Church. The Church looks at herself in youth, in all of you and in each of you. The Church is the real youthfulness of the world. Look upon the Church and you will find the face of Christ"*.

Vatican II and Youth.

In the message of the Council Fathers to humanity there is a section addressed specially to youth. This passage is worth re-reading: *"The Church during the last four years, has worked to rejuvenate her face to better answer the designs of her Founder, the Great Living, Christ, eternally young"*.

So our "old Mother the Church" is quite sensitive to her appearance. She has a mirror by herself (youth) just like many young boys and girls have to check their oddly misplaced hair. She has undergone, not just plastic surgery which is only skin deep, but real interior surgery hoping to bring new fruits to the world.

The Church Youthfulness of the World

Vatican II calls the Church the *"youthfulness of the world"*: because *"she possesses what constitutes the strength and the charms of youth, that is to say; the ability to rejoice with what is begging, to give oneself unreservedly, to renew oneself find to set out again for new conquest. Jesus is the Companion and Friend of youth"*.

The values which affect youth greatly affect and inspire the Church; thus they are profoundly sensitive to the values of justice, non violence and peace, fellowship, friendship and solidarity. They are moved by the causes related to the quality of life and the conservation of nature (see Christifideles Laici, 46).

These expressions which manifest how youth is an icon of the Church are really biblical expressions.

Youth and the Bible

There are hundreds of references about youth in the Bible (e.g Ps 105:5; Ps 110:3; Ps 127:4; Is 54:4; Lam 3:27; Eze 16:60; Hos 2:15, Acts 2:17).

The Psalm 103:5 says: *"God has satisfied you with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's"*.

The same idea is used by Is. 40:30 31:

*"Youth grow tired and weary,
the young stumble and fall
but those who hope in Yahweh
will regain their strength.
They will sprout wings like eagles,
Though they run they will not be weary,
though they walk they will never tire"*.

The eagle is long-lived and when it is old, casts all her feathers (as indeed she changes them every year at moulting time), and fresh ones come, so that she looks young again. When God, by graces and comforts of his Spirit recovers his people from their decays, and fills them with new life and joy, an earnest of eternal life and joy, then they may be said to return to their days of youth (Job 33:25) (2).

The Apostle John (1Jn 2:13-14) congratulates the young because they *"have overcome the Evil one, they know the Father, the Word of God abides in them and because they are strong"*.

Prophets Hosea and Ezekiel have compared Israel (or Jerusalem) to young girls. They have received their beauty from God. These prophets have seen in youth an image of Israel. And the Church, new Israel, has continued this tradition.

What does the Church say to those in charge of youth?

- **Christus Dominus**: *"Bishops should visit homes and schools and pay special attention to adolescents; and youth"*. (30.2) *"Parish priests should look after the young with great care"* (30)

• **Gaudium et Spes:** “Especially in the heart of their own families, young people should be aptly and seasonably instructed about the dignity, duty and expression of married love”. (49)

• **Inter mirifica:** “Particular effort should be expended to protect youngsters from literature and shows which would be injurious to them at their age”. (12)

• **Apostolicam Actuositatem:** “Training for the apostolate should start with a child’s earliest education. In a special way, however, adolescents and young adults should be initiated into the apostolate and imbued with its spirit”. (30) “Young people ought to become the prime and direct apostles of youth, exercising the apostolate among themselves and through themselves and reckoning with the social environment in which they live”. (12)

• **Christifideles Laici:** “The Church sees her path to the future in youth”.

• **Redemptoris Missio:** “Clearly the ordinary means of pastoral work are not sufficient. We need associations, institutions, special centres and groups. Cultural and social institutions for the young are needed”. (37)

• **Gaudium et Spes:** “Young people are to be praised and supported when they volunteer their services to help other men and nations”. (88).

• **Gravissimum Educationis:** “This holy Synod reminds pastors of souls of their acutely serious duty to make every effort to see that all of the faithful enjoy a Christian education of this sort, especially young people, who are the hope of the Church”. (2) “Young people should be trained to take their part in social life, so that by proper instruction in necessary and useful skills they can become actively involved in various community organizations, be ready for dialogue with others, and be willing to act energetically on behalf of the common good”. (1)

• **Octogesima Adveniens:** “Dialogue is proving difficult between youth and the adult generations. This can be a source of conflicts and divisions”. (13)

• **Populorum Progressio:** “Young people from other regions of the country or other countries must be given a warm welcome. More and more families and hostels must open their doors to them. We are distressed at what happens to many of these young people”. (67-68)

• **Catechesi Tradendae:** “Young persons speak a language into which the message of Jesus must be translated with patience and wisdom and without betrayal. Young people have a real desire to know Jesus, who is called Christ. Young people born and brought up in a non-Christian or non-practicing home... Must be ensured a catechesis attuned to them”. (40)

• **Evangelii Nuntiandi:** “Young people who are well trained in faith and prayer must become more and more the apostles of youth”. (72)

• **Centessimus Annus:** “Those who fail to keep up with the times can easily be marginalized as can the young people who are incapable of finding their place in society”. (33)

Having studied what the Church says to those in charge of youth, let us examine what the Church says to youth.

THE CHURCH SPEAKS TO YOUTH

– Youth should not yield to the seductions of egoistic or hedonistic philosophies.

– Let them open their hearts to the dimensions of the whole world.

– Let them hear the appeal of their brothers.

– Let them place their youthful energies at the service of their brothers.

– Let them refuse to give course to the instincts of violence and hatred which beget wars and all their train of miseries.

(From the message of the Council to humanity)

In **Christifideles Laici:** “Youth must not simply be considered as an object of pastoral concern for the Church. In fact young people are and ought to be encouraged to be active on behalf of the Church as leading characters in evangelization and participants in the renewal of society.” (46) And in **Vita Consecrata:** “If you hear the call of Christ, do not reject it! Dare to become part of the great movements of holiness in religious life. The third millennium awaits the contribution of faith and creativity of great number of young people.” (106)

Federation of Asian Bishops Conference (FABC)

In their 1995 meeting (10-19 Jan.) The bishops of Asia met in the Philippines to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the foundation of the FABC (It was also the 10th World Youth Day). In the document they issued, they listed the five most important concerns of the Church in Asia. Special concern for youth was one of the priorities (15.3)

Following on the FABC meeting in 1995 a special meeting was organized in January 1997 to examine the pastoral ministry of youth. The document “BILA on Youth” was issued. The Church wants to renew its commitment to youth. The spiritual life of the young and their involvement in the creation of a new society are the pointers for the future. Youth must be aware of the social issues and be educated in the social teaching of the Church.

Besides the teaching of the Bishops of Asia, the last two papal messages to youth to the occasion of Youth World Day are worth studying.

WORLD YOUTH DAY MESSAGES

The Pope invites young people to “fix their eyes” on Jesus, Who is the Teacher and Lord of Life. They must try to become living icons of the Church. Whatever she thinks of herself she would like to see reflected in youth. “Christians are not the disciples of a system of philosophy; they are men and women who, in faith, have experienced the encounter with Christ”. They are invited to work for a world that reflects the beauty of God, answering the question, Where can young men meet Christ? They are told that they will find him in their daily experience. “His visage is that of the poorest and the marginalized”. While in last year’s message they were invited to become “prophets of life, love and joy”.

(1) **Laren Armstrong.** *A History of God.* Mandarin, London, 1993, p. 257.

(2) **Matthew Henry’s.** *Commentary on the whole Bible in one volume.* SU Publishers. Singapore, 1982. •