

World Youth Day: From Toronto to Cologne

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Opening Talk

"Young People seeking the Face of Christ in Cologne WYD in 2005"

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We have to be attentive to what we intend during these days. We cannot imagine that young people in making their journey to Cologne in 2005 would perceive themselves to be on a journey that would be simply another tour and that they would be tourists. To make a pilgrimage is not a light matter. In fact, there is danger in encouraging young people to seek the face of Jesus while on a pilgrimage. Why is this so?

1. First of all, for young people to make a pilgrimage is to meet the natural human need to see and touch God. To seek the glory of God is no 'light matter' for the Hebrew equivalent of 'glory' in the Old Testament means something 'weighty' in a person, something which gives one 'importance.'

In *The Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer celebrates the return of springtime to England in one wonderful, complex sentence in the Prologue of the poem, eighteen verses in length. It compares the Christian's need to undertake a pilgrimage for healing and reconciliation with God to the round-the-clock urge of birds to mate in that season. "And the small fowl are making melody that sleep away the night with open eye (so nature pricks them and their heart engages)." For Chaucer, like the Fathers of the Church, all the flowing energies of the natural world remained epiphanies of the interior human quest for renewed life in the spirit.

"When the sweet showers of April fall and shoot down through the drought of March to pierce the root, bathing every vein in liquid power from which there springs the engendering flower, then people long to go on pilgrimages." They search for God so that he may give them new life. This God-established connection between the highest and the lowest on the ladder of being is the occasion of the sublime distinction between man and the animals and, at the same time, man's humble affinity with them.

In Chaucer there is no separation of the realms of piety and faith. In his merry stories he shows no evidence of a secularized intelligence. There is no indication of the radical disjunction between divine knowledge and human knowledge characteristic of the past one hundred and fifty years of western culture.

In this Catholic poet, we see how a many-layered tradition (pilgrimage to a shrine containing a relic) can eventually exhibit a whole range of phenomena, from the authentic spirituality of the Parson to crassest superstition and entrepreneurial greed. The very existence of such beliefs reveals the nature and quality of the Catholic faith at that time: Christians would not respond to a god as a mere abstract idea, an abstract spiritual principle or a subject of speculation. The Catholic faithful wished to see and touch the true God. This was no light matter.

We see this 'weighty' characteristic also in the Romei, the medieval pilgrims to Rome. They wished to venerate the great relic of the Passion of Christ, the image of Jesus imprinted on the veil of Veronica enshrined in St. Peter's Basilica. They longed to catch a glimpse of a concrete, physical fact; it was that which brought them to Rome. This desire of the Roman pilgrim was no light matter.

Catholic piety has always been very much connected with the physical. Patristic and medieval piety and theology is an elaboration of the opening of the First Letter of St. John: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life - the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us - that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that our joy may be complete."(1Jn 1:1-4)

The goal of the World Youth Day (WYD) pilgrimages is the discovery of the concrete norm of human life, the eternal Word of God whom John had seen, heard and touched. The experience of World Youth Day is rooted in the truth of the Incarnation of the Word as a real human being. Young pilgrims seek communion with God through and in Christ's humanity. This indicates that, in Catholicism, 'flesh' is no light matter. Jesus suffered in the flesh, he rose again in the flesh.

While on pilgrimage to Denver or Paris or Rome or Manila or Toronto, young people have discovered this physical contact with Christ. Through their living, walking, laughing, suffering and praying together with others the life and death of Jesus are again made

manifest. St. John's letter speaks of fellowship. The WYD pilgrimage offers communion to young people. They will come into contact with the wounded sensibilities of other Catholic Christians during days of movement towards Cologne, the goal of the pilgrimage and learn the meaning of Christ's identity with his disciples, "Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40).

2. In the second place, pilgrimages call the young man and the woman to transcend their person as a moral being and to rediscover man the sinner. A pilgrimage means to go beyond moralism in religion, that caricature of Christianity when it is made reductively into a system of commandments and nothing more. The WYD pilgrimage makes evident to young people an all-pervading sense that, even though all the blunders, hypocrisies and even malice of our personal and collective histories have scattered and divided the children of Adam, that is not the end of the story. Rather, Christ's mercy at the end has "gathered up the fragments from every side, forged them into the fire of love and welded into one what had been broken" (St. Augustine).

During their pilgrimage to Cologne, the young people will see the face of Christ in one another, in their bishops, in the priests and in the Holy Father. They will see the face of Christ in the Eucharist, the culminating reality of Christ's kenosis, his self-emptying. The Eucharistic face of Christ will teach the young pilgrims that the problem of life is not simply the problem of suffering. It is that, but it is more. The whole of the problem of life and its violence finds ample leg-room within the reality of sin. When pilgrims look upon the Eucharistic face of Christ in Cologne they will be looking upon one who has been condemned to die. He is God who has been condemned to death by man and his sin. Looking upon the face of Jesus, young people learn the nature of sin. It is deicide. It is mortal violence against God.

Some of us have grown accustomed to a God who smiles gently upon what we call our little misdemeanors, our mixed-up peccadillos. Some of us may even perceive God at times as having gone so far as to have wrinkled his brow at us and our aberrant ways. To others in the postmodern world the suffering face of Christ becomes nothing but a horrid and senseless mistake. Still others have rationalized their experiences so much that they have confounded under their notion of 'evil' both the throbbing pain arising from a tooth ache and the idea of deicide.

During their pilgrimage to Cologne young people will look upon the multiple-facets of the face of Christ. When they remain quiet for some time and penetrate with contemplative eyes the eyes of Jesus,

they will begin to fathom "the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mk 1:1). They will see that sin and its violence have taken a terrible toll. It has caused the death of the Son of God upon the wood of the Cross. That is the meaning of the Eucharistic face of Christ. Sin is not simply a matter of breaking the law. It is that but much, much more. It is in the first place a crime against love. The Eucharistic face of Christ teaches young people that the God of love responds in his own way and according to own Trinitarian nature: by a total, infinite self-surrender.

Many of the young pilgrims to Cologne will remain strangers to Jesus of Nazareth, the humble and poor man, unless you, each of you as their leaders and their Christian models, has first recognized Jesus yourself. Only through your own personal experience of Christ's pardon and forgiveness, will you be able to offer the necessary help to them in seeing Jesus's true identity. "That which we have heard, seen and touched, we also proclaim to you so that our joy may be complete." May your joy be complete in Cologne.

Before disciples can show to others the distinctive and dear lineaments of the face of Jesus in themselves, they should ask for a special grace: the gift of tears while contemplating his tears. "Jesus offered up prayers....with loud cries and tears" (Heb 5:7). Some may be able to experience such a gift only through what St. Catherine of Siena called 'the tears of fire'; these are 'shed' without physical weeping. This is often the experience of those who want to weep but cannot. It involves a true and holy longing which consumes the disciple in love. In communion with St. Francis of Assisi in contemplation of the suffering face of Jesus, one may wish to dissolve his very life in self-giving through weeping for the salvation of others, but is unable to do so. "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2Cor 3:18).

3. Finally, the WYD pilgrimage will teach young people that, despite all human sinfulness and perverse cunning, they can still believe that human nature is one and good and overflowing with possibilities. God's love will reveal to them that human existence is unified and comprehensive. Much can be forgiven among those who have "loved much" (Lk 7:47). With each step on the pilgrimage the young pilgrims will be faced with their own fallibility and corruptibility. Likewise, they will be faced with the idiosyncracies and sinfulness of others. At the same time, they will learn a greater lesson: that no amount of human inconsistency and deviousness can quite manage to squelch the radiance of what God has created. It is He who is responsible for the intrinsic goodness of human nature.

The WYD pilgrims will arrive at the city gates of Cologne and face what pilgrims from every age have faced. Here they will feel the full weight of God's glory, for here they will meet God's mercy. Chaucer portrayed it in this way. When the medieval English pilgrims arrived at the beginning of the approach to the great Cathedral of Canterbury where the relics of the bishop/martyr, St. Thomas à Becket, were enshrined, they left behind their story-telling. With all the errors and hot passions manifest in their conversations in the past, the time had come for those medieval pilgrims to examine their conscience. And so the Parson was the last of the group to address them.

The Parson's rhythm and style counterpointed that which had dominated the work. His tale was not a story nor was it in verse. Rather he preached a sermon in prose on the nature of the Seven Deadly Sins. He intended to help the pilgrims prepare themselves for conversion of heart through the Sacrament of Confession. The Parson uttered the following prayer for mercy by way of introduction, "If you'll excuse me, but I'll speak in prose, a happy thing, to knit and make an end of all our feast. Jesu in mercy send me wit to guide your way one further stage upon that perfect, glorious pilgrimage called the celestial, to Jerusalem." Here is the climax of the poem. Chaucer revealed himself as the poet of wonderful merriment only because he was first of all the poet of God's mercy.

As we prepare to lead the Catholic youth of the world on a world-wide pilgrimage to Cologne in 2005 with Pope John Paul II, we call upon the God whose mercy is everlasting. During these days in Rome, we pray for ourselves, for the forgiveness of our sins and for the children of God whom he will entrust to us and other leaders in 2005.