

## John Paul II's Apostolic Letter to the Youth of the World<sup>1</sup>

*The attention given to the recent encyclical of Benedict XVI reminds us that there is a wealth of such material from the recent Popes. At the beginning of the school year, it is appropriate to examine another such document, John Paul II's Letter to the Youth of the World. Despite its having been directed to youth, its principles are universal; Catholics of any age would benefit from reading it.*

POPE JOHN PAUL'S Apostolic Letter of 31 March 1985 is not only addressed to the youth; it is youthful in spirit. This youthfulness arises from two characteristics of the letter: a mood of hopeful optimism, and standards of fairness and justice as rigorous as those young people expect from individuals and governments. The Pope knows that these qualities are not universal, but he has captured the mood of youth at its best. The result is a superb document, among the best he has written. It represents, in fact, an instance of the Pope's Christian humanism. In his first encyclical, *Redemptor hominis*, he described the relationship of Christianity to human culture. It should flourish, as in its natural setting, where there is access to God. As a corollary, then, the most attractive qualities of youth should be those that bring young persons to Jesus Christ.

The opening sections consist of a profound commentary on the meeting between Jesus and the rich young man (Mark 10.17-22). In referring to this well-known passage, the Pope raises questions in the minds of his readers: What about the ending, in which the young man because of his many possessions turns away from Christ? And what about that strange remark of Jesus, "No one is good, but God alone"? As if aware of these questions, John Paul starts from those many possessions and, with youthful *insouciance*, simply dismisses them. They kept one youth from Jesus, but the Pope is confident that they will not have that effect on his modern counterparts. The idea of being rich, however, leads to a consideration of other riches, which are shared by all young people: the disposition to ask, "What must I do to gain eternal life?" To be young is to wonder about such mighty things.

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<sup>1</sup> The text is available on the Vatican web site:  
[www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_letters/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_31031985\\_dilecti-amici\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_31031985_dilecti-amici_en.html)

The answer to this question, John Paul points out, was implicit in Jesus' statement, "God alone is good." When youth asks the ultimate purpose of life, about "eternal life," they are asking about goodness, about justice, about a peaceful world. That God alone is good means that God alone can provide the answer to the deep longings that youth knows so vividly, for there can be no good without God.

Finally, the Pope notes that the young man approached Jesus with his question. In this we can complete what we have seen thus far: that youth's greatest treasure is the ability to ask the sublime question; that this very question implies a desire for God who alone is good; and, now, that it only through Jesus Christ that there is access to God.

The Pope is now ready to consider the actual replies that Jesus gave to the young man: "Keep the commandments," and then, with love, "Go, sell what you have . . . come, follow me!" Having established the goal, there is the need to use the means that bring man to it—the ten commandments and the call to give all of oneself to what is good. The translation of the Gospel dialogue into a conversation between Jesus and today's youth is made, therefore, in two steps. The first concerns the ten commandments, which are revealed not only in Scripture but, universally, in every time and place, in that they are impressed on man's conscience. Conscience, properly formed, is the tutor that will create the sort of adult who will adhere to those high moral standards that the youth of today espouse. We have here a fine restatement of traditional Catholic teaching on morality and conscience. But when Jesus finds a generous soul before him, he opens the way to a higher vocation. Again, this call to a more sublime relationship with God can be found across the human race.

Among the followers of non-Christian religions, especially Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, we find that for thousands of years there have been hosts of "spiritual men," individuals who often from early youth leave everything in order to live in poverty and purity and quest for the Absolute that exists beyond the appearances of material things.

Christians find explicit in the Gospels the "something more: which all men seek: "Go, sell what you have . . . and come, follow me!"

Traditionally, this has been done by joining a religious community or becoming a priest (for which, the Holy Father reminds his readers, the Latin Church still demands celibacy). There is a note of urgency in his depiction of the need for "vocations." Nevertheless, with Vatican II, the Pope emphasizes that every Christian life is a "vocation," a call to follow Christ completely. There follows, consequently, a discussion of the married state and of man's work in the

world, material that has been extensively treated in other papal documents. Their concise restatement here makes an impressive conclusion to an excellent letter. 