



CURIA
GENERALIZIA
AGOSTINIANA

VIA PAOLO VI, 25 - 00193 ROMA
TEL. +39 06.680061

LETTER FROM THE PRIOR GENERAL OF THE ORDER OF ST. AUGUSTINE TO YOUNG PEOPLE

Roma, 19 March 2018
Prot. N. 64/18

Dear young people:

I greet all of you, young people from our schools, parishes and other Augustinian groups, at this time when the Church celebrates and reflects on our faith with young people. The XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops will be held in Rome in October 2018. Then, in January 2019, World Youth Day (WYD) and the Augustinian Youth Encounter (AYE), will both take place in Panama. Regarding the Synod, the theme directly affects you: *"Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment"*. As part of the preparation, Pope Francis wrote a letter to Young People¹. You may already be aware of this letter and I encourage you to read again. It begins by affirming that the Holy Father carries you in his heart. I assure you that I also carry you in my heart. I am convinced that any institution with a call towards the future must have a fixed eye and heart on the young. But this must be true in action and not only in word.

The theme of the next WYD refers to the response of Mary in Luke's Gospel (Lc 1,28) *"Behold the handmaid of the Lord: let it be done to me according to your word"*. To answer our vocation, we need to discern what the Lord tells us, what he wants from us. And we also need to act boldly and decisively. In this process of discernment, the Holy Father reminds us that, *"the first step in overcoming fears is to identify them clearly, so as not to find yourself wasting time and energy by being gripped by empty and faceless ghosts. And so, I invite all of you to look within yourselves and to "name" your fears. Ask yourselves: what upsets me, what do I fear most in this specific moment of my life today? What blocks me and prevents me from moving forward? Why do I lack the courage to make the important choices I need to make? Do not be afraid to face your fears honestly, to recognize them for what they are and to come to terms with them."*².

We must, however, go one step further. *"Heaven and earth sing your praises, O Lord!"*³ As this theme of AYE 2019 beautifully recalls, our attitude must always be

¹ Cf. *Letter of His Holiness, Pope Francis, to Young People on the Occasion of the Presentation of the Preparatory Document of the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, Vatican, January 13, 2017. I also invite you to read St. Augustine's counsel to young people, Cf. *On Order*, 2, 8, 25.

² *Message of Pope Francis for the XXXIII World Youth Day (Palm Sunday, March 25, 2018)*, 1.

³ Cf. *Confessions* 10, 6, 8.

positive and creative. The one who encounters the Lord, proclaims His wonders, giving witness to *the One*, not only from listening but also from personal experience. It is a challenge! Thus, the efforts made to humanize interpersonal relationships, to choose the culture of encounter, to understand happiness, joy and peace as shared goods, all point to the Gospel as a guide in our pilgrimage. All of life will be a passing and futile adventure if one does not live a strong friendship with Jesus of Nazareth who strengthens our weakness, raises us from our fallenness and decisively directs us toward optimistic hope. This is the greatest urgency, the clearest need.

1. Change the World.

At WYD, which took place in July 2016 in Krakow, the Pope asked the gathered young people: "Can things be changed?"⁴ And thousands of youthful voices convincingly answered: "Yes!" More than just a momentary cry, it was the collective manifestation of rejection of a world in which injustice, indifference and loneliness prevail, of an inhuman world that seems to be heading towards self-destruction. Protesting strongly against this self-destruction is a Christian requirement. But protest must go hand in hand with commitment, which unites the noblest aspirations with the fragility of our human condition. Thus, the possibility of renewal is born.

In a letter that St. Augustine wrote to Paulinus of Nola, he comments that Africa has more thirst for Saints than for water.⁵ The same could be said of our world, characterized by uncertainty, economic inequality among people, materialism, insecurity and the growing number of immigrants and refugees. It is an aged and sick world. Young people, "Wake up!" Change the world, renew it, transform it! Don't give up! Certainly, things can change. Accept the responsibility given to you. Be protagonists. Consider what St. Augustine wrote: "Again and again consider that you are young: fight, that you may overcome: overcome, that you may be crowned: be lowly, that you fall not in the fight"⁶.

2. Do not be afraid, go against the current.

In today's world, it may be strange to speak of interiority, of prayer, of spirituality. As it may also be strange to talk about God. The answer to the pursuit of happiness is not pleasure and owning many things, nor in activism and dispersion, nor in fragile feelings and weak relationships. It is not the selfishness that leads to lack of commitment, individualism and loneliness. The answer is Christ. Live your adventure and take risks. "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction."⁷ Be with Christ, encounter and experience Christ. For him, the only way is true love: "We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us" (1Jn 4,16).

⁴ Cf. *Discourse of the Holy Father in Jordan Park*, Krakow, Poland, July 28, 2016.

⁵ Cf. *Letter* 31, 4.

⁶ *Tractate on the First Letter of Saint John* 2, 7.

⁷ Benedict XVI, *Encyclical Letter: Deus caritas est*, 1.

In a world of indifference and lack of solidarity, be men and women strongly committed to welcoming, listening and being merciful. St. Augustine does not hesitate to affirm that "Christ is needed when there is someone poor"⁸. The forms of poverty and exclusion have multiplied and we are the answer. Our response must be active, close and merciful, always aware that the greatness of God is his mercy⁹. Some theologians have pointed out that it is necessary to rediscover tenderness in Christianity¹⁰. And Pope Francis has insisted on it repeatedly: "Do not be afraid of kindness and tenderness"¹¹.

3. Always choose life in its fullness.

With your lives before you, you have to ask yourself what you are going to do with it. With this we now approach the subject of vocation. Saint Augustine felt the attraction of affections, of the intellect, of social promotion, of beauty, and finally of God. He found himself at a crossroads with many questions. One can feel called to different vocations, different callings and, therefore, a dizzying confusion or doubt can accompany any vocational process understood as a life choice. To avoid settling into a dangerous pattern of indecision, the spiritual practice of discernment emphasizes the importance of accompaniment as an aid to finding answers to vocational questions.

It is always God, through our encounter with others, sometimes unexpectedly, who takes the initiative in the creation of each vocation. What are you going to do with your life? One's vocation could be understood merely in the professional sense, but I ask you to consider it from a deeper perspective; as an option of life in its fullness, as a search for happiness. Therefore, dear young people, you must ask yourselves to what is God orienting you? Saint Augustine reminds us: "Even if someone attributes to himself to having answered the one who calls, no one can claim to be able to call oneself."¹². I thank the Lord for having called me to follow him as an Augustinian, on this beautiful, demanding and real journey. And I also thank Him for having put so many opportunities to encounter Him in my life, so many people through whom I heard His voice and I felt, and still feel, His presence. God will reward your generous availability. My dear young people, you also need reference figures today. I think of the priests, religious, educators, pastoral ministers who walk with you, offering a clear and credible testimony of our Christian life. I want to address to them a word of sincere gratitude for being there, tirelessly, confessing their faith and giving their time.

God has truly given us a time of hope, full of possibilities. For me it will be a real joy to be able to live this life together. I hope and wish from my heart that the Synod of Bishops with the theme, *Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment*, World Youth Day, and the Augustinian Youth Encounter, find an echo in you and in your groups, both in your preparatory journey and in the course of your celebrations. I

⁸ *Sermon 38,6, 8.*

⁹ Cf. *Tractate on the Gospel of John 14, 5.*

¹⁰ Cf. C. Rocchetta, *Teologia della tenerezza. Un "vangelo" da riscoprire*, Bologna 2000. (*Theology of tenderness, a 'gospel' to be rediscovered*).

¹¹ Cf. *Homily of Pope Francis at the Solemn Mass at the Inauguration of his Pontificate*, Vatican, March 19, 2013.

¹² *Unfinished Exposition of the Letter to the Romans, 7.*

encourage you to remain open to the Spirit and to discern the will of God in your personal history. Place your trust truly in Christ, without fear, without mediocrity, without falsehood. Be instruments of renewal and hope, starting with yourselves, to be able to renew the world and the Church.

To each and every one of you and also to those with whom you share the task of exploring the mystery that we carry within, to learn the wisdom of the heart and discover one's own path, I send you fraternal greetings and prayers. I also ask your prayers for the Order of St. Augustine and for all of us who have responsibility in animating and guiding the Order. Together we place ourselves in the hands of Mary, Mother of Good Counsel. In her we "can experience the tenderness of intimacy and the courage of witness and mission."¹³.

Many thanks, dear young people. May God bless you.

P. Alejandro Moral Antón OSA

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Prior General OSA



¹³ Preparatory Document of the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops.