
« THEY WOULD SET THE WHOLE WORLD ABLAZE »



During Lent, this year, I want to prepare with you for the Seventeenth World Youth Days to be held from July 18 to 28, this year. To the two million youth who journeyed to Rome in the year 2000, pope John Paul II said: "At the dawn of the third millennium I see in you the 'sentinels'," and the following day, in the homily of the closing Mass, I told them that if they were what they should be, they 'would set the whole world ablaze!'"

AN EXTRAORDINARY PILGRIMAGE

One can travel to Toronto for any number of reasons: sightseeing, sports competitions, business meetings. This time, though, the planned trip to Toronto will be an unforgettable pilgrimage. We often correctly describe life as a person's special journey. From birth to death, each person is on a pilgrim journey. The Bible stresses several times the importance of going on pilgrimage to the holy sites of either Bethel or Jerusalem. Along with Mary and Joseph, Jesus undertook such a pilgrimage to the holy city of Jerusalem. Pope John Paul II writes that "the history of the Church is the journal of an unfinished pilgrimage," and he adds: "Pilgrimage has always been a meaningful time in the life of believers; it took on different a colouration at different periods to express different cultures. The pilgrimage calls to mind the believer's personal journey along the path of the Redeemer. It is a beneficial exercise in self-mastery, in repenting for human failings, in constant watchfulness over one's own fragility, in inner preparation for reforming the heart. Through watchfulness, fasting, and prayer, the pilgrim journeys on the road to Christian perfection, aiming, with God's grace, for to reach the status of the perfect human, the fulness of the stature of Christ."

OPEN-AIR TEMPLE

The meeting place set by Pope John Paul II is not a regular place of pilgrimage Like St. Anne-de-Beaupré, Our Lady of the Cape Shrine, or St. Joseph Oratory in Montreal. No, the place of meeting is Exhibition Park in Toronto. That is where close to one million young people will gather. Each young person is "a unique cathedral", the temple of the Holy Spirit. To discover the loving presence of Jesus in the hearts of our brothers and sisters is an important gesture of faith and hope. The baptized are "living stones" of a incomparable sanctuary.

A PEOPLE'S PILGRIMAGE

Yes, "[...] the Bible is the story of a long pilgrimage: that of an entire people. When, through the Bible, we listen to the experiences of these men and women of another era, we often discover amazing and useful similarities with the lives of women and men today." [*Salt and Light*, Preparing for World Youth Day 2002 in Toronto, Handbook, Ottawa, Novalis, p. 21.] During this period of preparation for the 17th World Youth Day and throughout its festivities, the youth will tell one another the story of their own pilgrimage; they will share about their faith and hope, their doubts and certainties, their joys and anxieties, their dreams and projects. These young people will experience intense and stimulating, unforgettable times with the power to give meaning to their whole lives. We only have to talk to those young people who have been to one of the former WYDs; they all agree that the WYD are now at the heart of their lives as believers.

A HEART AS BIG AS THE WORLD

As they look at the world today, the youth have plans “as big as the world”: they wish for a real peace among all people, a fair sharing in the world’s riches, and respect for the environment. They cannot remain indifferent to the billions of hungry, wounded, sick, excluded, marginalised people. They take seriously the globalisation of solidarity, education for all young people today, respectful interpersonal communication and sharing of each other’s cultures, and concern for the fate of native people everywhere. They really want to build a better world based on fellowship, justice, and truth.

“SEE HOW THEY LOVE ONE ANOTHER”

Jesus, too, had such a dream for the world of his time and for ours. Robert Lebel wrote this beautiful song based on St. John’s Gospel: “I wish is that in seeing you others will say, ‘See how they love one another! See how happy they are!’ Let there be a world of love and truth, in your language: let it be true, plain and direct; let it be good as a warm summer’s night. But even stronger than words, your look will touch the hearts of others. The greatest of all parables is the song of your happiness. And faced with all that you do, they will be able to see the image of God. Seeing all that you do, they will know that He is with you. If it is true that a tree is recognized by its fruit, I hope that in looking at you others will discover the fruits of the Spirit.”

A YOUNG GIRL WHO WANTED TO “SET THE WORLD ON FIRE”

On September 8, 1896, one year before her death, 23 year-old St. Theresa of the Child Jesus wrote these words: “Oh! Despite my littleness I would like to enlighten souls as the prophets and the doctors [of the Church] did. I have an apostle’s vocation... I would like to roam the earth, preach your word and plant your glorious Cross in heathen lands, but, my Beloved, I would not be satisfied with only one mission, I would also like proclaim th Gospel at the same time to the four corners and the farthest reaches of the world.. I would like to be a missionary not only for a few years, but I would like to have been one from the first day of creation and until the end of time... But I would like above all, my beloved Saviour, I would like to shed my blood for you, to the last drop!...” Theresa, the greatest saint of modern times, was declared patron of missions even if she herself never set foot outside her monastery. She was also declared one of the main patrons of the World Youth Day. She who wants to spend her eternity doing good on earth will surely inspire those youth who share a like ideal and who will be gathering in Edmundston on July 21 and in Toronto from July 23 to 28 of the year 2000.

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« From A Bishop’s Journal » (425) (27 February 2002)