



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PARTICIPANTS
IN THE EIGHTH INTERNATIONAL YOUTH FORUM
(ROCCA DI PAPA, 31 MARCH - 4 APRIL 2004)**

1. I should like, first of all, to extend my cordial greetings to all the students who have come together at this time in Rocca di Papa for the eighth "International Youth Forum" on the theme "Young people and the university: witnessing to Christ in the university world". Your presence is a source of great joy to me, because it is a shining example of the ever-young universal face of the Church. For you have come from five continents, representing over 80 countries and 30 international Movements, Associations and Communities. And I should also like to greet the Rectors, professors and lecturers attending the Forum, as well as the bishops, priests and the laity engaged in the pastoral care of universities, who will be accompanying the students as they reflect over the coming days. I wish like to express my most sincere thanks to the President of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, Mgr Stanislaw Rylko, and all his co-workers, for convening this welcome event. I vividly recall previous years' Forums organised to coincide with the international celebrations of World Youth Day. For this year it was decided to renew the format, to give the Forum a more clearly defined scope, emphasising its educational dimension by choosing a specific theme around which to debate one concrete aspect of young people's lives. The theme for this meeting is certainly highly topical and meets a real need. I am delighted that so many young people, coming from such rich and diverse cultures have gathered at Rocca di Papa to reflect together, to share their experiences, and to embolden one another to bear witness to Christ in the world of higher education.

2. It is important in our age to rediscover the bond that unites the Church to the world of higher education. For the Church not only played a decisive role in founding the first universities, but throughout the centuries she has been a workshop of culture, and continues in the same direction today through the Catholic Universities and various forms of presence in the vast world of higher education. The Church sees the University as one of those "workplaces in which man's vocation to acquire knowledge, and the constituent bond of humanity with truth as the purpose of knowledge, become a daily reality" for so many professors, young researchers and generations of students (address to UNESCO, 1980). Dear students, in the University you are not only recipients of services, but you are the true protagonists of the activities performed there. It is no coincidence that the period spent in higher education is a vital stage in your existence, in which you prepare yourselves to take on the responsibility for decisive choices that will direct the whole of your future life. It is for this reason that you must approach higher education with a searching spirit, to seek the right answers to the essential questions about the meaning of life, happiness and complete self-fulfilment, and beauty as the splendour of truth. Fortunately, the influence of ideologies and Utopias fomented by the messianic atheism that had such an impact in the past on many University environments has waned considerably today. But there are also new schools of thought, which reduce reason

to the horizon of experimental science alone, and hence to technical and instrumental knowledge, sometimes enclosing it within a sceptical and nihilistic vision. These attempts to evade the issue of the deepest meaning of existence are not only futile; they can also become dangerous.³ Through the gift of faith we have met the One who introduces himself with these surprising words: "I am the truth" (Jn 14,6). Jesus is the truth of the universe and of history, the meaning and the destiny of human existence, the foundation of all reality! It is your responsibility, you who have welcomed this Truth as the vocation and certitude of your lives, to demonstrate its reasonableness in the University environment and in your work there. The question that then arises is: how deeply does the truth of Christ affect your studies, research, knowledge of reality, and the comprehensive education of the human person? It may happen that, even among those who profess to be Christians, some will behave in the University as if God did not exist. Christianity is not a mere subjective religious preference, which is ultimately irrational, and relegated to the private sphere. As Christians we are duty-bound to bear witness to what the Second Vatican Council affirmed in *Gaudium et Spes*: "For faith throws a new light on everything, manifests God's design for man's total vocation, and thus directs the mind to solutions which are fully human" (no.11). We must demonstrate that faith and reason are not irreconcilable, but that, "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth" (cf *Fides et ratio*. Intr.)⁴. My young friends! You are the disciples and the witnesses of Christ in the University. May your University days be for all of you a period of great spiritual and intellectual maturity, which will lead you to deepen your personal relationship with Christ. But if your faith is linked merely to fragments of tradition, fine sentiments or a generic religious ideology, you will certainly not be able to withstand the impact of the environment you are in. You must therefore seek to keep your Christian identity steadfast, and rooted in the communion of the Church. To do this, you must be nurtured by persevering in prayer. Whenever possible, seek out sound University professors and lecturers. Do not remain isolated in what are often difficult environments, but play an active part in the life of Church associations, movements and communities operating in the university environment. Draw close to the University parishes, and allow the chaplaincies to help you. You must build the Church within your Universities, as a visible community which believes, prays, gives account for our hope, and lovingly welcomes every trace of good, truth and beauty in University life. All this has to be done wherever students live and meet, and not only on the campus. I am certain that the Pastors will not fail to devote particular care to ministering to the University environments, and will appoint holy and competent priests to perform this mission.⁵ Dear participants at the 8th International Youth Forum, I am happy to know you will be present in St Peter's Square next Thursday, to meet the young people from the Rome diocese, and later for the Palm Sunday Mass, when we shall be celebrating together the 19th World Youth Day on the theme "We wish to see Jesus" (Jn 12, 21). It will mark the final stage in the spiritual preparation for the great gathering in Cologne in 2005. It is not enough to "speak" about Jesus to young undergraduates: we must also "show" Jesus to them, through the eloquent witness of our lives (cf *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 16). My wish for you is that this Rome meeting will help to strengthen your love for the universal Church and your commitment to serving the University world. I am depending on each and every one of you to hand on to your local Churches and your ecclesial groups the richness of gifts that you are receiving in these intense days here. Invoking the Virgin Mary, Seat of Wisdom, to protect you on your path, I impart a special heartfelt Apostolic Blessing on you and on all those - fellow students, rectors, professors, lecturers, chaplains and administrative staff - who, with you, make up the great "University community". *From the Vatican, 25 March 2004* **IOANNES PAULUS II**