



**Opening Catechesis
Australian Catholic Youth Festival**

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“Blessed are the pure of heart – for they shall see God”. The theme of our Youth Festival which, of course, is one of the Beatitudes, is closely connected with the theme of next year’s World Youth Day in Poland: “Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy”.

On a recent trip to Florence, Pope Francis challenged those who were with him in the Cathedral, saying that the Beatitudes are a way for the Church to judge whether it is following its true mission or only thinking of protecting its own interests. If this question can be put to the whole Church, and it can and must be, then it can equally be put to each one of us for we, every single one of us and all of us together, are the Church – not the whole Church maybe, but the Church nevertheless.

The Pope went on to say that measuring yourself against the Beatitudes is like looking into a mirror that never lies. And he appealed to all his listeners, just as he appeals to us today: “We must not tame the power of the face of Jesus”. If He were here with us now, I think He would say to us: take this chance to gaze into the mirror of the Beatitudes. Be thrilled at the ways in which you recognise yourselves there. Be set on fire by the possibilities for true greatness that you glimpse in the challenge they hold out for you. Be sorry, and regretful, for the ways in which you do not yet really find yourself in that mirror. Let these days together be an opportunity to grab hold of all that is being offered. Let yourselves be set free to be the people you most want to be.

Not that long ago, Pope Francis was asked by a young person who was attending a meeting between the Pope and a Catholic Youth Movement in Rome if he saw any signs of hope and joy in the Church. This is what he replied: *Seeing young people like you who believe in Jesus present in the Eucharist, who believe that love is stronger than*



hatred and that peace is stronger than war – this is a sure sign of hope and something that gives me joy.

Belief in Jesus, belief in love, belief in peace – and I would add, belief in the Church: these are things which I hope and believe we will all find together over the next few days. In the workshops and discussions, in the liturgies, in the meals, in the times of quiet prayer and reflection, and in the moments when we just get the chance to waste time together: in all of these experiences, and especially in what happens deep within each one of us, I personally am hoping, and expecting, that we will all catch a glimpse, and maybe more than just a glimpse, of what the Church is really all about. I'm hoping that we will all see, maybe more clearly than we do at the moment, that the Church is about life rather than death, about energy and excitement rather than about listlessness, about freedom and hope rather than about restriction and emptiness, about vitality rather than about boredom, about exploding outwards rather than closing in, and about love – passionate, committed, respectful, selfless and freeing love.

In saying all that, I think I want to also say that it can all be put together with one simple word: Jesus. The Church is about Jesus. Take Jesus out of the Church, or effectively banish Him to the margins, or simply exclude Him from our plans and projects – do this and we really have nothing much left. The Church might stumble along for a while, or live on the memory of its past successes, or continue to exist as a kind of social welfare agency – but it will be quickly running out of steam, will begin to stutter and slow down, and will eventually be nothing more than an empty shell.

Some people think this is already starting to happen. I don't know about you but I don't for a minute believe this is true, at least not everywhere. But I am convinced of one thing: if there are signs that this might be happening to the Church in some place or other – if you think it might be starting to happen in your own local Church scene - you can be pretty sure that people have lost sight of Jesus. And if that is happening, in a segment of society, in a local community, in a Christian family, or in the hidden places of our own hearts, then somewhere, somehow, someone has to stand up with courage, and enthusiasm and conviction and point us again to Jesus, encourage us to look into His eyes, help us to listen to His voice, and show us what it means to let Him love us and support us and be the friend to us that He wants to be.

This is everyone's task in the Church but it seems to me that, somehow or other, it's a task and a challenge that the Lord and His Church are calling you as young people to respond to in a special way. It is what this Youth Festival is all about. And it is certainly



the task that Pope Francis is putting before you. At a talk to young people in St Peter's Square in 2013, this is what he said:

Why do I like being with young people? Because you all have inside your heart a promise of hope. You are bearers of hope. You all, it is true, live in the present, but you look towards the future... you are the authors of the future, craftsmen of the future. This is your joy – and it is a beautiful thing: to go towards the future, with dreams, with so many beautiful things. But this is also your responsibility – to become builders, craftsmen, of the future... set your sights on a great ideal, the ideal of making a world of goodness, of beauty and of truth. You can do this – you have the power to do it... so have courage, go forward, make noise. This is what I wanted to tell you: do good things, have joy in your hearts... be courageous.

To be a bearer of hope – to be a builder of the future – to make a world of goodness, beauty and truth. This is who you are, this is why God gave you the gift of life, this is why God has called you into His Church. This is what God needs from you – this is what the Church needs from you – and I want to say that giving your “yes” to all this, challenging and daunting and demanding though it all is, is an absolutely guaranteed way to deep and lasting happiness. You will be exactly who and what God created you to be and you will find a peace that leaves you free to live your lives with all the energy and excitement and enthusiasm you have within you.

The days ahead of us hold out this promise to us all. God has something special in mind for each one of us. I'm absolutely sure of that. We may not recognise what it is immediately, it may come when we least expect it, and it may be very different from what we were presuming would be the things that matters most to us – but be alert, and open and expectant: there is a gift on offer for each of us over these days.

I want to make a suggestion before I finish: I want to offer you a Gospel story which I would encourage you to keep in your mind and heart over our time together. It's the story of the rich young man.

This young man came up to Jesus and asked Him what he had to do to gain eternal life. Jesus gave Him what was, in a sense, the standard answer: keep the Commandments. And, to help the young man, Jesus started to list the Commandments for him: do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal and so on. The rich young man was able to say, “I have kept all these since my earliest youth”.



And then there is a great line, a really uplifting and encouraging line, in the Gospel story. It says, “Jesus looked at him and loved him.” And, out of that love and admiration for this good, faithful young person, Jesus said, “You know, there is one thing you lack: Go, sell all that you own, give the money away to the poor, and then come and follow me”. And then we find one of the saddest lines in the whole Gospel. We are told that the rich young man’s face fell, and he walked away sad, because he was a person of great wealth.

The point of this story isn’t really, as far as I can see, the simple fact of the young man’s wealth. Rather, it was the fact that, in the face of this exciting and life-changing invitation to follow Jesus, the young man simply couldn’t find it in himself to say yes because there was something that was so important to him that he couldn’t let go of it – and, in clinging to that, he let go of something even more fantastic – the chance to be among Jesus’ followers, the chance to be at the heart of the extraordinary adventure of Jesus’ life and mission, the chance to be someone who could join Jesus in His mission to change the world.

In one way or another, Jesus will offer the same invitation to every single person who is here for this festival. Some of us might think we have already said “yes” to Jesus – and, hopefully, at least to some extent we have – but, like the rich young man, it is very likely that there is something, and maybe quite a few things, which are holding us back from really saying yes and really accepting the invitation to be, in Pope Francis’ words, builders and craftsmen of the future which God is dreaming of for us and for our world. At this stage, we may not even know what it is that is holding us back. Maybe the rich young man didn’t realise how fatally attached he was to his money until he was invited to let it go. It might be money for us, but it might also be the dream we have created for our life, or the career we have built, or the freedom we cherish so highly, or the philosophy of life we have committed ourselves to. Who knows?

Perhaps, at this stage, it is only God who really knows. But when we hear His voice calling, in whatever way it comes – and it may well be that we will hear it during these days together – perhaps it will be then that we will know what it is to which we are so attached, but which is actually holding us back from being the people we were created to be. The very possibility makes these days ahead of us a bit daunting – but also very exciting.

So let’s not be afraid, let’s set our sights on a great ideal, let’s dream of making a world of goodness and beauty and truth. Let’s make a bit of noise and wake the world up to



the fact that Jesus is with us, that we have committed ourselves to Him and that we're ready to go out knowing that we have each other's support, that the Church is behind us, and that while on our own we might not be able to do much, together, and with the help of the Lord, there is no limit to what we can do.

Let's not tame the power of the face of Jesus. Instead, let's allow ourselves to reflect His face, His heart, His love to everyone we meet.