



**Flame: Rise Up
National Youth Congress CYMFed**

Speech

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Hi Everyone.

Thanks for that great welcome and thanks to all of you, and especially the organisers of Flame 2023, for the opportunity to join you for this fantastic celebration. I couldn't believe my luck when Fr Bob Gardner, a Salesian priest here in London, contacted me and invited me to be with you all and to share some thoughts about the theme of Flame 2023: Rise up. In recent times, since the Covid-19 pandemic started to slow down a bit and we have all been able to travel again, I seem to have been rising up a lot; the most recent time was when I rose up in an A330 in Perth in Western Australia and set out on the long journey to London.

We all know, of course, that the theme for Flame 2023 is based on the theme for the next World Youth Day in Portugal: Mary arose and went with haste. It's a great thing that both WYD later this year, and your gathering today, have Mary front and centre. Mary is often described as the very first and very best disciple of Jesus and for that reason she has a lot to teach us, that she really does matter.

Mary is all about helping us to be the best disciples of Jesus that we can possibly be so she is always pointing us away from herself and directing us towards him. Remember what she said to the waiters at the wedding feast in Cana? The wine had run out – a very embarrassing situation for the new bride and groom – and Mary had gone to Jesus to see what he might do. Although she wasn't sure just what that might be, she simply turned to the waiters and said, "You do whatever he tells you". That's her message to us as well; that's what she most wants – that we do whatever the Lord is asking us to do. It seems to me that this is exactly what Flame 2023 is about: it is about helping every single one of us to work out, as best we can, just what the Lord might be wanting to say to us.

God speaks to us in lots of ways and one of those ways is through Pope Francis. I remember really well when, in Poland at the last World Youth Day, the Pope invited the millions of young people who had gathered there to get up off the couch and get moving. "The time we are living in," he said, "does not call for young couch potatoes but for young people with shoes – or better boots, laced up and ready to go".



This is a call to everyone, of course, but in a very particular way it is a call to you – and to young people like you – to get up, get moving, become passionate about the things that really matter - and work together to make a difference. The Church needs your energy, your enthusiasm, your restlessness and your idealism – and when I say the Church needs all this I am really saying that God is asking this of you.

This is because the Church is always in danger of getting stuck and closing in on itself; thankfully God constantly does things to shake us all up. In our time God has given us Pope Francis. He keeps reminding us that we have to become a missionary Church, a Church that doesn't stay hidden inside its buildings but gets up, gets going, and takes some risks in order to share what we have with others.

Getting up, getting going, taking some risks: this is exactly what Mary did when she “arose and went with haste” as WYD 2023 puts it, to meet up with her cousin Elizabeth. We often think that Mary did this because she had been made aware that Elizabeth, who was no longer a young woman, was unexpectedly pregnant and Mary, in her generosity and concern, rushed to help her. I'm sure that's true but maybe there is more to it than that. Mary had just had her whole life turned upside down by the visit of the angel who told her that she was to be the mother of the messiah. It wasn't something that had ever been on her radar. Initially Mary was frightened, then she became confused, and only when she was reassured that it was the Holy Spirit who was at work that she found the courage to say “yes”. But the angel had also told her of what had happened to Elizabeth: in a different way her life, too, was turned upside down.

I think Mary was driven by a need to share what had happened to her with someone else whose life had also been touched in a powerful way by God. There's something really important here: when God steps into our lives, and especially when in one way or another God points the way forward for us, it is often a deeply personal and private thing. We may need time to think it all through and work out exactly what it all means. But when the time is right, it's also good to share our own experience with others – to tell our stories and celebrate the ways in which God is always surprising us by what happens to us, even if we don't always recognise at first that it is God at work.

So Mary definitely was a woman of action and a woman of great courage. She acted quickly when she found out that her cousin was expecting a child. She arose and went out with haste. Together with Joseph, she set out on a long and dangerous journey to Egypt as a refugee in order to protect the life of her child. She was down to earth enough to accept an invitation to a family or friend's wedding feast. She had the courage to stand at the foot of the cross and watch her son die, when most of his closest disciples had abandoned him.

But she was also a deeply reflective woman who, the gospels tell us, was constantly pondering over everything that happened to her. I'm convinced it was this pondering – what we should



probably call this praying - that was the source of her courage and her activity. So there's something here for all of us as well, something that goes with being, as I mentioned before, a true disciple. It's not always all about the doing – it is also all about working out why we are doing what we're doing – and to do this we will need to slow down, sit quietly, and listen for the often-quiet ways in which God speaks to us.

What was true of Mary has been true of so many other disciples of Jesus through the ages. Let me remind you of just one of them now.

A long time ago, in a country a long way from Australia, though not quite so far from here in the UK, a young man, possibly in his early twenties or even younger, came home from fighting in a local war against a neighbouring kingdom. He had just been released from prison, as he had been injured and then captured in the course of the fighting. That experience changed him. Before he went to war, he was a typical, fun-loving young person who seemed to live primarily for parties, reckless adventure, and generally a good time. After the war he closed in on himself, became moody and withdrawn, and spent long hours on his own.

Living in a religious culture he was surrounded by the symbols of the Catholic Faith. The countryside around him was peppered with road-side shrines and many little country churches, some of them slowly falling down through neglect.

One day this young man entered one of these tumble-down church buildings and discovered that there was a red lamp burning in front of a crucifix hanging on the back wall of the church. The young man knelt down to say a prayer, and it seemed to him that the figure of Christ hanging on the cross spoke to him. And this is what that young man heard: go and rebuild my Church for it is falling into ruin. The young man looked around him at the crumbling walls and roof and he realised that here, in this humble little place, he could find a reason to live again, and to love again, and to hope again. He decided that he would do just what the voice had told him to do: he would rebuild this little church and restore it to its simple beauty.

The young man's name was, of course, Francis - Francis of Assisi- and the Church the Lord was calling him to rebuild was not so much that tiny church building dedicated to Saint Damien in the countryside outside Assisi, but rather the Catholic Church, the Lord's Church, which in many respects seemed to have lost its way and needed to rediscover it.

As we all gather here in London for Flame 2023 we know that our Church, or rather the Lord's Church, seems to be in trouble. The terrible scourge of sexual abuse of the young has caused so much suffering to so many people, and created distrust and suspicion about the Church and especially about its leaders. The number of people who regularly attend Mass or the sacraments continues to decline. If the UK is anything like Australia, across your country values which we as Catholics have always held close to our hearts are being challenged by a society which no longer seems to want to retain its links to its Christian foundations. And while for some, at least, material prosperity continues to increase, so does the level of violence in our cities and towns, so does



the rate of suicide, so does the experience of mental health challenges, so does the prevalence of drug abuse.

It all sounds a bit bleak and we could easily give in to a sense of hopelessness and even despair. Like that young man, Francis, coming back from war we could be tempted close in on ourselves, become moody and withdrawn, isolate ourselves - or we could, like the earlier version of that young man, throw ourselves into a hectic life of endless parties, constant distractions, a kind of deliberate turning-away from the challenges all around us.

But if, like that young man, we give ourselves a chance to tune in to another wave-length, we too might hear a mysterious and persistent voice calling to us not to sink into a sense of hopelessness, or a life of frivolous distraction. We might hear a voice saying to us, much as Pope Francis said to those young people at World Youth Day in Poland, "Get off the couch: set out on new and uncharted paths."

This was the modern Francis putting into contemporary language the words the other Francis heard so long ago. So maybe this is what God is saying: Young people of the UK, get up off your couches, go and help rebuild my Church, help it to set out on new and uncharted paths. Help stop the Church from falling into ruins.

In the Pope's talk in Poland he went on to say this: The Lord wants to work one of the greatest miracles we can experience: he wants to turn your hands, my hands, our hands, into signs of reconciliation, of communion, of creation So, young people, have the courage to teach the rest of us that it is easier to build bridges than walls!

Francis of Assisi knew that the Lord was calling him to rebuild the Church, not to tear it down and create a new one, and the Lord will be asking us, asking you, to do the same. It's what Pope Francis believes the Lord is asking of all of us at this time. There are lots of discussions going on all around the Catholic world at the moment about this, including preparations for a special meeting of bishops and others in Rome in October (it's called the Synod on Synodality). I know that Pope Francis is very keen that the voices of young people be heard as the Church tries to listen to God's Spirit leading us into our future. If you get the chance, through your parish, youth group, or in some other way, to share your hopes for the Church with the rest of us, then I hope you will take it. It's what Pope Francis is asking for: "Don't be afraid to make some noise", he says to you. "Don't be afraid of causing a bit of mess, don't be afraid of sharing what is in your hearts with the rest of the Church.

But remember, Francis of Assisi made more noise by what he did than by what he said and Pope Francis, though he speaks often, is the same. So maybe it's a case of less talk and more action. Young people are good at that.



“Go and rebuild my Church” the Lord is saying to you today. Some in the Church have lost their way, lost their heart, lost their hope. So be people, young people, of the Way, the Way of Jesus. Be young people of heart and of hope in the Church.

I'd like to finish by reminding you of another story from the gospels about Jesus encouraging someone to get off his couch and get moving. It's the story of a young man who, like Saint Francis, was pretty well off financially and who, also like Saint Francis, had a good heart and a deep desire to do the right thing. This young man asked Jesus what he, the young man, needed to do in order to gain eternal life. Initially Jesus gives what we might call the stock-standard answer. “Keep the Commandments”, he says. The young man shoots back with a quick response. “Which ones?” he says. Jesus starts to list them off, and it is clear that he is basically saying, “Keep all of them”. The young man then says, and I believe quite sincerely, “I have kept them all since my earliest youth”. This is an impressive answer. I wonder how many of us, if we found ourselves in the same position as the young man, could honestly say the same thing. Jesus is impressed by this young man – the gospel says he looked at the young man with love – and then he says this to him: “There is one thing you are lacking. Go and sell everything you own, give the money to the poor and then come and follow me.” This is Jesus' way of saying to this young person, “It's time to get off the couch, time to get up and get moving, time to get serious about following me.” You probably know what is coming next. I think it is one of the saddest moments in the gospel story. When the young man realised what Jesus was asking he walked away sad because he was a person of great wealth.

What an opportunity missed! We know about this young man who failed to follow Jesus, but we don't know his name. Nor do we know what this young man did with the rest of his life. Was he among the crowd in Jerusalem who eventually turned against Jesus and called for his death? Was he perhaps someone who regretted his decision not to follow Jesus and eventually found his way back to Jesus and to the Christian community Jesus had established? Did his refusal of Jesus's invitation harden his heart and leave him imprisoned by his money forever?

We don't know the answer to these questions and we don't really need to know because the real question is not what happened to this particular young man. The real question is whether or not we are ready to accept whatever invitation Jesus is offering to us.

For the young man in the story the thing that prevented him from saying “yes” to the adventure of being a disciple of Jesus was his wealth and his inability to imagine his life without his money. That may also be the case for some of you here today but perhaps not all of you. But there will be something. The really urgent question, then, is this: What is that something for you? What is stopping you from giving your wholehearted yes to him?

This is a challenging question but if we are willing to ask it of ourselves and courageous enough to give an honest answer, then like the rich young man Jesus will be offering us the adventure of a lifetime.



So ask yourself this: If on my way home from Flame 2023 tonight I were to run into Jesus, and if I were able to find the courage to go to him and say “Lord, what do I need to do in order to live my life to the full?” and he were then to say to me, “Keep the commandments”, would I be able to say to him, honestly, “Lord, I have kept them all since I was very young”?

Maybe you would, and if so that would be a great thing. But even if you couldn't, and yet still wanted to ask Jesus to tell you what you needed to do, and if he were to turn to you and look you in the eye with love, what does your heart tell you now that he would probably say to you? Certainly he would call you by your name and then he'd say, “If you really want to have the fulness of life then you go and what? Sell all you own and give the money to the poor? Maybe. Rethink your career choices and opt for something that perhaps pays less but contributes more to our society? Possibly. Let go of the anger and resentment you feel towards people who have hurt you? Stop insisting on always having things your own way and start to focus on the needs and desires of others?

There are so many answers to the question “Lord what must I do?” The answer Jesus gives to you will depend on your own circumstances and also on what it is that you hold closest to your heart but which is preventing you from being the person God has created you to be.

The key line in the story, of course, is this: Come and follow me. So don't walk away sad from the opportunity Jesus holds out to you for an heroic life. Don't walk away sad from the chance to make your life a wonderful gift to others. Don't walk away sad from the chance to live your life to the full just as God intended you to when he called you into existence. Don't walk away from Jesus. He is alive, he is here with us, and he's calling to each one of us, asking us if we are ready to get up off our comfortable couches, put on our walking boots and get ready to follow him, no matter what. Today take the chance he is offering you, take your courage in both hands, and open your hearts and your lives to him. Like Mary, like Saint Francis, like the Pope, like all the great figures of our Church past and present, claim your rightful place in the Church and help to rebuild it, so that it does not fall into ruins.