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Mass for World Youth Day: do not let your soul grow numb

This morning at 10 a.m., in the Campus Misericordiae, Pope Francis celebrated the concluding Holy Mass of the 31st World Youth Day, attended by more than a million people.

Before the celebration the Pope was received by the mayor of Wieliczka, in whose territory the Campus is located, and by the director of the diocesan Caritas. He visited one of the two buildings intended for the poor and the elderly in difficulty, and blessed the structure. This was followed by an extensive tour of the Campus by popemobile, greeting the young people who had spent the night there and who waved the flags of their countries of origin as he passed.

The readings were from the prophet Hosea (“I desire mercy, not sacrifice”), the Letter of St. Paul to the Ephesians (“God ... rich in mercy”), and the Gospel of St. Luke (“Today salvation has come to this house”), were read in Italian, Portuguese, Polish and Paleoslavic, respectively.

In the homily he pronounced after the Gospel reading, the Holy Father took the example of Zacchaeus to invite the young people to accept themselves as they are, without sadness or regret for the past, and to aim high, to participate in life, and to remember that World Youth Day does not end in Krakow as Jesus is present in their daily life, their plans, their affections and their dreams.

The following is the full text of the Pope's homily:

“Dear young people, you have come to Krakow to meet Jesus. Today's Gospel speaks to us of just such a meeting between Jesus and a man named Zacchaeus, in Jericho. There Jesus does not simply preach or greet people; as the Evangelist tells us, He passed through the city. In other words, Jesus wants to draw near to us personally, to accompany our journey to its end, so that His life and our life can truly meet.

“An amazing encounter then takes place, with Zacchaeus, the chief ‘publican’ or tax collector. Zacchaeus was thus a wealthy collaborator of the hated Roman occupiers, someone who exploited his own people, someone who, because of his ill repute, could not even approach the Master. His encounter with Jesus changed his life, just as it has changed, and can daily still change, each of our lives. But Zacchaeus had to face a number of

obstacles in order to meet Jesus. It was not easy for him; he had to face a number of obstacles. At least three of these can also say something to us.

“The first obstacle is smallness of stature. Zacchaeus couldn’t see the Master because he was little. Even today we can risk not getting close to Jesus because we don’t feel big enough, because we don’t think ourselves worthy. This is a great temptation; it has to do not only with self-esteem, but with faith itself. For faith tells us that we are “children of God... that is what we are”. We have been created in God’s own image; Jesus has taken upon Himself our humanity and His heart will never be separated from us; the Holy Spirit wants to dwell within us. We have been called to be happy for ever with God!

“That is our real ‘stature’, our spiritual identity: we are God’s beloved children, always. So you can see that not to accept ourselves, to live glumly, to be negative, means not to recognise our deepest identity. It is like walking away when God wants to look at me, trying to spoil His dream for me. God loves us the way we are, and no sin, fault or mistake of ours makes Him change His mind. As far as Jesus is concerned – as the Gospel shows – no one is unworthy of, or far from, His thoughts. No one is insignificant. He loves all of us with a special love; for Him all of us are important: you are important! God counts on you for what you are, not for what you possess. In His eyes the clothes you wear or the kind of cell phone you use are of absolutely no concern. He doesn’t care whether you are stylish or not; He cares about you, just as you are! In His eyes, you are precious, and your value is inestimable.

“At times in our lives, we aim lower rather than higher. At those times, it is good to realise that God remains faithful, even obstinate, in His love for us. The fact is, He loves us even more than we love ourselves. He believes in us even more than we believe in ourselves. He is always ‘cheering us on’; He is our biggest fan. He is there for us, waiting with patience and hope, even when we turn in on ourselves and brood over our troubles and past injuries. But such brooding is unworthy of our spiritual stature! It is a kind of virus infecting and blocking everything; it closes doors and prevents us from getting up and starting over. God, on the other hand, is hopelessly hopeful! He believes that we can always get up, and He hates to see us glum and gloomy. It is sad to see young people who are glum. Because we are always His beloved sons and daughters. Let us be mindful of this at the dawn of each new day. It will do us good to pray every morning: ‘Lord, I thank you for loving me; I am sure that you love me; help me to be in love with my own life!’ Not with my faults, that need to be corrected, but with life itself, which is a great gift, for it is a time to love and to be loved.

“Zacchaeus faced a second obstacle in meeting Jesus: the paralysis of shame. We spoke a little about this yesterday. We can imagine what was going on in his heart before he climbed that sycamore. It must have been quite a struggle – on one hand, a healthy curiosity and desire to know Jesus; on the other, the risk of appearing completely ridiculous. Zacchaeus was public figure, a man of power, but deeply hated. He knew that, in trying to climb that tree, he would have become a laughingstock to all. Yet he mastered his shame, because the attraction of Jesus was more powerful. You know what happens when someone is so attractive that we fall in love with them: we end up ready to do things we would never have even thought of doing. Something similar took place in the heart of Zacchaeus, when he realised that Jesus was so important that he would do anything for Him, since Jesus alone could pull him out of the mire of sin and discontent. The paralysis of shame did not have the upper hand. The Gospel tells us that Zacchaeus ‘ran ahead’, ‘climbed’ the tree, and then, when Jesus called him, he ‘hurried down’. He took a risk, he put his life on the line. For us too, this is the secret of joy: not to stifle a healthy curiosity, but to take a risk, because life is not meant to be tucked away. When it comes to Jesus, we cannot sit around waiting with arms folded; He offers us life – we can’t respond by thinking about it or ‘texting’ a few words!

“Dear young friends, don’t be ashamed to bring everything to the Lord in confession, especially your weaknesses, your struggles and your sins. He will surprise you with His forgiveness and His peace. Don’t be afraid to say ‘yes’ to Him with all your heart, to respond generously and to follow Him! Don’t let your soul grow numb, but aim for the goal of a beautiful love which also demands sacrifice. Say a firm ‘no’ to the narcotic of success at any cost and the sedative of worrying only about yourself and your own comfort.

“After his small stature, after the paralysis of shame, there was a third obstacle that Zacchaeus had to face. It

was no longer an interior one, but was all around him. It was the grumbling of the crowd, who first blocked him and then criticised him: How could Jesus have entered his house, the house of a sinner! How truly hard it is to welcome Jesus, how hard it is to accept a 'God who is rich in mercy'! People will try to block you, to make you think that God is distant, rigid and insensitive, good to the good and bad to the bad. Instead, our heavenly Father 'makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good'. He demands of us real courage: the courage to be more powerful than evil by loving everyone, even our enemies. People may laugh at you because you believe in the gentle and unassuming power of mercy. But do not be afraid. Think of the motto of these days: 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy'. People may judge you to be dreamers, because you believe in a new humanity, one that rejects hatred between peoples, one that refuses to see borders as barriers and can cherish its own traditions without being self-centred or small-minded. Don't be discouraged: with a smile and open arms, you proclaim hope and you are a blessing for our one human family, which here you represent so beautifully!

"That day the crowd judged Zacchaeus; they looked him over, up and down. But Jesus did otherwise: He gazed up at him. Jesus looks beyond the faults and sees the person. He does not halt before bygone evil, but sees future good. His gaze remains constant, even when it is not met; it seeks the way of unity and communion. In no case does it halt at appearances, but looks to the heart. Jesus looks to our hearts, your heart, my heart. With this gaze of Jesus, you can help bring about another humanity, without looking for acknowledgement but seeking goodness for its own sake, content to maintain a pure heart and to fight peaceably for honesty and justice. Don't stop at the surface of things; distrust the worldly cult of appearances, cosmetic attempts to improve our looks. Instead, 'download' the best 'link' of all, that of a heart which sees and transmits goodness without growing weary. The joy that you have freely received from God, please, freely give away: so many people are waiting for it! So many are waiting for it from you.

"Finally let us listen to the words that Jesus spoke to Zacchaeus, which to be seem meant for us today, for each one of us: 'Come down, for I must stay at your house today'. 'Come down, for I must stay with you today. Open to me the door of your heart'. Jesus extends the same invitation to you: 'I must stay at your house today'. We can say that World Youth Day begins today and continues tomorrow, in your homes, since that is where Jesus wants to meet you from now on. The Lord doesn't want to remain in this beautiful city, or in cherished memories alone. He wants to enter your homes, to dwell in your daily lives: in your studies, your first years of work, your friendships and affections, your hopes and dreams. How greatly He desires that you bring all this to Him in prayer! How much He hopes that, in all the 'contacts' and 'chats' of each day, pride of place be given to the golden thread of prayer! How much He wants His word to be able to speak to you day after day, so that you can make His Gospel your own, so that it can serve as a compass for you on the highways of life!

"In asking to come to your house, Jesus calls you, as He did Zacchaeus, by name. All of us, Jesus calls by name. Your name is precious to Him. The name 'Zacchaeus' would have made people back then think of the remembrance of God. Trust the memory of God: His memory is not a 'hard disk' that 'saves' and 'archives' all our data, His memory is a heart filled with tender compassion, one that finds joy in 'erasing' in us every trace of evil. May we too now try to imitate the faithful memory of God and treasure the good things we have received in these days. In silence, let us remember this encounter, let us preserve the memory of the presence of God and His word, and let us listen once more to the voice of Jesus as He calls us by name. So let us now pray silently, remembering and thanking the Lord Who wanted us to be here and has come here to meet us".

At the end of the celebration, and after greetings from Cardinal Stanislaw Ryłko, president of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, Pope Francis gave a lamp, sign of Christ's light, to some young people.