

## **WYD: Meeting with young university professors at the Basilica de San Lorenzo de El Escorial**



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Dear Friends,

I have looked forward to this meeting with you, young professors in the universities of Spain. You provide a splendid service in the spread of truth, in circumstances that are not always easy. I greet you warmly and I thank you for your kind words of welcome and for the music which has marvellously resounded in this magnificent monastery, for centuries an eloquent witness to the life of prayer and study. In this highly symbolic place, reason and faith have harmoniously blended in the austere stone to shape one of Spain's most renowned monuments.

I also greet with particular affection those of you who took part in the recent World Congress of Catholic Universities held in Avila on the theme: "The Identity and Mission of the Catholic University".

Being here with you, I am reminded of my own first steps as a professor at the University of Bonn. At the time, the wounds of war were still deeply felt and we had many material needs; these were compensated by our passion for an exciting activity, our interaction with colleagues of different disciplines and our desire to respond to the deepest and most basic concerns of our students. This experience of a "Universitas" of professors and students who together seek the truth in all fields of knowledge, or as Alfonso X the Wise put it, this "counsel of masters and students with the will and understanding needed to master the various disciplines" (Siete Partidas, partida II, tit. XXXI), helps us to see more clearly the importance, and even the definition, of the University.

The theme of the present World Youth Day - "Rooted and Built Up in Christ, and Firm in the Faith" (cf. Col 2:7) can also shed light on your efforts to understand more clearly your own identity and what you are called to do. As I wrote in my Message to Young People in preparation for these days, the terms "rooted, built up and firm" all point to solid foundations on which we can construct our lives (cf.

No. 2).

But where will young people encounter those reference points in a society which is increasingly confused and unstable? At times one has the idea that the mission of a university professor nowadays is exclusively that of forming competent and efficient professionals capable of satisfying the demand for labor at any given time. One also hears it said that the only thing that matters at the present moment is pure technical ability. This sort of utilitarian approach to education is in fact becoming more widespread, even at the university level, promoted especially by sectors outside the University. All the same, you who, like myself, have had an experience of the University, and now are members of the teaching staff, surely are looking for something more lofty and capable of embracing the full measure of what it is to be human. We know that when mere utility and pure pragmatism become the principal criteria, much is lost and the results can be tragic: from the abuses associated with a science which acknowledges no limits beyond itself, to the political totalitarianism which easily arises when one eliminates any higher reference than the mere calculus of power. The authentic idea of the University, on the other hand, is precisely what saves us from this reductionist and curtailed vision of humanity.

In truth, the University has always been, and is always called to be, the "house" where one seeks the truth proper to the human person. Consequently it was not by accident that the Church promoted the universities, for Christian faith speaks to us of Christ as the Word through whom all things were made (cf. Jn 1:3) and of men and women as made in the image and likeness of God. The Gospel message perceives a rationality inherent in creation and considers man as a creature participating in, and capable of attaining to, an understanding of this rationality. The University thus embodies an ideal which must not be attenuated or compromised, whether by ideologies closed to reasoned dialogue or by truckling to a purely utilitarian and economic conception which would view man solely as a consumer.

Here we see the vital importance of your own mission. You yourselves have the honour and responsibility of transmitting the ideal of the University: an ideal which you have received from your predecessors, many of whom were humble followers of the Gospel and, as such, became spiritual giants. We should feel ourselves their successors, in a time quite different from their own, yet one in which the essential human questions continue to challenge and stimulate us. With them, we realize that we are a link in that chain of men and women committed to teaching the faith and making it credible to human reason. And we do this not simply by our teaching, but by the way we live our faith and embody it, just as the Word took flesh and dwelt among us. Young people need authentic teachers: persons open to the fullness of truth in the various branches of knowledge, persons who listen to and experience in own hearts that interdisciplinary dialogue; persons who, above all, are convinced of our human capacity to advance along the path of truth. Youth is a privileged time for seeking and encountering truth. As Plato said: "Seek truth while you are young, for if you do not, it will later escape your grasp" (Parmenides, 135d). This lofty aspiration is the most precious gift which you can give to your students, personally and by example. It is more important than mere technical know-how, or cold and purely functional data.

I urge you, then, never to lose that sense of enthusiasm and concern for truth. Always remember that teaching is not just about communicating content, but about forming young people. You need to understand and love them, to awaken their innate thirst for truth and their yearning for transcendence. Be for them a source of encouragement and strength.

For this to happen, we need to realize in the first place that the path to the fullness of truth calls for complete commitment: it is a path of understanding and love, of reason and faith. We cannot come to know something unless we are moved by love; or, for that matter, love something which does not strike us as reasonable. "Understanding and love are not in separate compartments: love is rich in understanding and understanding is full of love" (*Caritas in Veritate*, 30). If truth and goodness go together, so too do knowledge and love. This unity leads to consistency in life and thought, that ability to inspire demanded of every good educator.

In the second place, we need to recognize that truth itself will always lie beyond our grasp. We can seek it and draw near to it, but we cannot completely possess it; or put better, truth possesses us and inspires us. In intellectual and educational activity the virtue of humility is also indispensable, since it protects us from the pride which bars the way to truth. We must not draw students to ourselves, but set them on the path toward the truth which we seek together. The Lord will help you in this, for he asks you to be plain and effective like salt, or like the lamp which quietly lights the room (cf. Mt 5:13).

All these things, finally, remind us to keep our gaze fixed on Christ, whose face radiates the Truth which enlightens us. Christ is also the Way which leads to lasting fulfilment; he walks constantly at our side and sustains us with his love. Rooted in him, you will prove good guides to our young people. With this confidence I invoke upon you the protection of the Virgin Mary, Seat of Wisdom. May she help you to cooperate with her Son by living a life which is personally satisfying and which brings forth rich fruits of knowledge and faith for your students. Thank you very much.

Pope Benedict XVI