

The Responsibility of Youth in Contemporary Society

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You will allow me first of all to express my joy and appreciation to all of you and to each of you one by one, for gladly coming to the 'Sunshine State', so that we may speak about the Sun!

The 'Sun' of every human society in every period of history, is its Youth.

And just as the Sun – whether through the clouds or in clear skies – never ceases to benefit or damage the physical well-being of all things according to circumstances, so it is that the Youth of any period in time can be a 'flag bearer' in the midst of a 'battle of honour', or a promising start for a courageous rebirth of an entire community or nation. Otherwise, Youth can also become a painful symptom of inconsolable degeneration.

We shall have the opportunity below to describe in some detail the most basic features of Youth which, by definition, make them the 'Sun' amidst all other stages of human life.

Together with underlining the main features of Youth, we shall also be able to 'weigh up' the responsibility of this enviable age group.

Only in so doing will we appreciate the 'debt' that youth has among contemporary people, with concrete conditions of mutual respect and trust, for the advancement of culture and civilization.

However, it needs to be said here that this is the first time in the entire tradition of our National and State Youth Conferences (from 1981 until today) that we have Youth as more than the discussion partner. Instead, we have this time placed Youth *itself* as the theme, in order to establish – through discussion with all of you – the criteria with which we should be measuring the responsibilities of young adults in modern society.

The major features of Youth in our times:

It is common knowledge that not all people mature at the same age; they do not develop at the same rate physically, and they certainly do not develop at the same time in terms of 'personality'.

In spite of this, we have come to regard Youth as being the so-called Teenagers, between 13 and 20 years of age.

Yet in the context of our Youth Conferences, we felt from the outset that it was best not to adhere strictly to this age bracket alone. So that more young men and women from the broadest cross-section of modern society might participate in the 'soul-searching' of these Conferences of our Archdiocese.

At any rate, bearing in mind this flexibility in looking at various stages of youth, we could even include 25 year-olds as Youth today.

We can then see a picture of the Youth of our times which, realistically speaking, clearly lies within the limits of a specific decade (from 15 to 25).

It is about this 'Youth' actually that we shall speak at this Conference. We have come to listen to how the variety of Youth views their place and responsibility in the context of today's society.

Those of us who are more advanced in age, or even elderly, at this Conference must turn all of our attention, all of our humility, and all of our love towards the young people around us. Especially when we have invited them to a public Dialogue, as equal discussion partners, and moreover to an official Forum such as this National Conference.

In this way, we shall assist young people to express themselves more easily, that is to say more sincerely, about how they see themselves 'functioning' in our modern society. Not only functioning, but perhaps even pioneering, contributing substantially to the various sectors of life.

At this very point, allow me to repeat a personal 'observation' which I have expressed on many occasions, whether speaking or writing about Youth.

Normally, Parents, Teachers, Priests and other figures in public life, have the impression that we are stating the noblest sentiments, the highest expectations, and the deepest estimation for the collective value of our Youth, when we confess again and again that "children are our future".

However, we definitely need to add here, without any hesitation, that Youth are not simply our Future. They are also our Present. Perhaps they are above all our Present.

For, without Youth, our Present is not only dull and sometimes without consolation. A Present of that kind has already expired before its time! Because it lacks the shine and the 'fresh' air of Youth - that which we call the 'morning breeze'.

I had expressed the very same Pastoral and fatherly concern about the above 'correction', as one may see clearly expressed in certain brief poems of mine about children of every age, and about young people in general.

God-willing, a bi-lingual collection of these poems will soon be published, under the general title '*Children and Adolescents*'. While selecting the poems for the publication, I myself was amazed (!) afterwards at how many substantial aspects of the young soul were unexpectedly 'revealed' to me, as I tried to 'decode' with reverence the yet incomplete 'person' we call a child.

I could truly speak for endless hours about the expressions of 'inner growth' which I would carefully 'read' in the eyes, the gestures, the silence, the outbursts, or the boredom and perplexity of young people, when faced with the harsh reality of modern life and society.

Yet so as not to be led astray here by the generalities of pointless 'sentimentality', which would not assist us in the study of our topic, we must turn to a very concise list of 'advantages' and 'disadvantages' which characterize the various phases of today's Youth:

1. The young person, as a rule, still maintains child-like sincerity which does not allow him to 'put on an act' in order to be pleasant all the time.

On the contrary, such sincerity can at times reach the point of crudeness, if not barbarity.

In this way, the young person convinces the adults of his immediate environment about his respective needs and desires.

At the same time, however, he or she is naturally exposed to countless dangers of exploitation, or at least of 'misunderstanding'!

2. Another characteristic, closely 'related' to the previous one, is 'hurriedness', or what we would normally call 'impatience' of the young to 'know' and 'become familiar', or rather 'conquer' everything around them.

Deep down, this hurriedness is nothing more than an enormous 'optimism' of the child or adolescent in view of the miracle of life.

When the biological 'reflexes' are still fresh and strong, people think that they can do everything in record time.

On most occasions, this youthful self-confidence is neither 'self-deception' nor necessarily 'impertinence'.

Today we see how easily children and young adults familiarize themselves with modern technology, especially Digital Communications and Information Technology, as they always have greater flexibility to adapt to new situations.

We adults however find it difficult to follow such developments, unless we are obliged to do so for professional reasons.

Let us not forget, also, that the idea of 'bright youth' has almost become identified, in the subconscious of the people, with that of 'beauty'!

We often hear in everyday speech statements that describe, for example, a young lady in the following way:

"Her youthfulness is her beauty!"

Indeed in Crete – as our guest Professor Charalambakis knows very well – there is a characteristic '*mantinada*' (a kind of folk song) which does not sing triumphantly about beauty and youthfulness, but rather sees also the 'traps' which both may encounter in life:

*"Beauty is a wound
Whose blood is always running.
My God, how does one who has it
Manage to even cope?"*

It would not be an exaggeration to say that this curious hymn to beauty reminds us of the 'Portraits of the Dead' which were discovered in Fayoum, Egypt. The

wide-open sorrowful eyes of those portraits express on the one hand a boundless thirst and nostalgia for life, while on the other hand displaying a very apparent bitterness about death. As such, they were justly considered to be the missing link between the Paintings of the Ancients to the Icons of Christianity.

Following the above, we must admit that, only after Youth have gone through hardships (παθήματα) which bring the relevant lessons (μαθήματα) can they appreciate that their formerly limitless optimism was in fact a dangerous naiveté or even superficiality.

This is at any rate how the wise saying came about:

"If only I knew then what I know now!"

With these observations, we have ventured into another basic yet, at the same time, complex feature of the youthful soul.

3. We refer to the willingness to make a fresh start and quickly rectify one's former life which, due to frivolity, has perhaps wasted – in a manner similar to the Prodigal Son of the Gospel Parable – valuable time and energy in 'vanities' or entirely empty values.

A classic example in more recent times of youthful superficiality on a grand scale was the Youth Movement in France during May 1968, passionately led by the anarchist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, who caused turmoil not only in Europe and America, but also across the whole planet.

Using surrealistic slogans, such as *'imagination in governing'* or *'down with authority'*, among many other irresponsible things, they managed in just a few hours to set up road blocks, and destroy every concept of order, or feeling of responsibility, throughout the terrorized community of Paris.

The foolishness of that kind of enthusiasm, coupled with the fear of the multitude of peace-loving fellow citizens (who were unfairly and contemptuously referred to as 'compromised', 'submissive' or 'servants of the establishment'), naturally gave rise to two diametrically opposed extremities, from which the modern world has not yet fully recovered.

In other words, we saw on the one hand, various movements (of a leftist or anarchic kind) spreading and maturing, and on the other hand reactionary groups (of excessive conservatism and fear) which even led to phenomena of unacceptable fascism.

Even the current Pope Benedict XVI, as Professor Joseph Ratzinger, prior to his election, had played a leading role during the Second Vatican Council in formulating pioneering documents to rid the Roman Catholic Church of medieval remnants, which overshadowed the pure message of the Christian Gospel. Just a few years later, he would repeatedly state that the Vatican had to 'put a stop' to many initiatives for renewal, precisely because of the anarchy that broke out of Paris in 1968 and spread rapidly to so many countries, and not only among the young!

It is worth noting that many of the initiators of that Parisian uprising found themselves just two decades later in very high positions within State Bodies and other organizations, and admitted their regret in interviews. Such is the fruit of maturity!

This example undoubtedly shows that Youth can be well-meaning and acknowledge their former faults with sincerity and courage. They then rise up, as we mentioned earlier, to a sensible and creative life with corresponding actions.

In closing, those of us who are responsible for the education of young people from childhood through to late adolescence must be aware that there are basically two main areas that we should not neglect or ignore, so that they are in a position to appreciate the timeless importance of both.

On the one hand, there are the studies in humanities, which can correctly check and guide all kinds of progress made by the Sciences and Technology.

On the other hand, and equally necessary (if not more so), is the importance of worshipping the Divine in general.

Vast experience in the world history of humankind has proven in manifold ways that, whenever there was a down-sizing, marginalization or complete disappearance of even *one* of the two mentioned areas (*i.e.* cultivation of studies in humanities or religious/theological tradition) there is automatically the development of the so-called 'one-dimension man'.

This has been the conclusion of modern psychological and sociological research.

And the 'one-dimension' man, when speaking about development and progress, usually means the economic and technical comforts and 'improvements'. Yet man is more than his 'stomach'!

It is quite significant that, even with the abovementioned provocative misunderstanding of progress and development (which has led whole governments and economic systems of today's civilization into the jungle of unending greediness), Youth has given to all of us very often the best example of a modest lifestyle: in food, dress, entertainment and travel.

With this very positive image of contemporary Youth, let me close my address, and at the same time express the hope that adults in all fields of life never cease to learn from the Youth how simple the 'recipe' is for fulfilment, satisfaction and happiness.