

“The Pope of the Young: John Paul II’s Theological Juvenology”
An Annotated Outline

I. Introduction

- A. The Pope elected 24 years ago today has had a tremendous impact on young people. He still does after all these years. Many commentators scratched their heads once again this past Summer when several hundred thousand young people went to Toronto, to surround an old, frail man.
- B. Explanations for his impact on young people vary, but are almost always superficial.
 - 1) It’s not simply because he’s the head of the Catholic Church. John Paul II’s personal popularity exceeds that of the Church. Many look to him as a hero and dislike the teachings of the Church he transmits.
 - 2) It’s not that he’s the 263rd successor of St. Peter, because we live in an age where authority is more suspect than respected, especially among young people.
- C. His success with young people has something to do, I’m convinced, with his communication style, both verbal and non-verbal, what he says to young people by his words and what he says by his actions. We’ll talk about that style in a second.
- D. Most of all, his popularity and achievement can be traced, I’m convinced, to his tremendous success in doing just what his greatest hope is to do — this great lover and teacher of of human love since the time he was a young priest — which is to be a **matchmaker**, to bring two people together in a deep relationship of love. John Paul II successfully helps young people to come into contact with a living Jesus who loves them, who trust them, who challenges them, who’s died for them, and who’s living for them right now.
- E. Pope John Paul II is a catalyst for every young person to say, “It’s all true,” that everything they learned in catechism is accurate. God really did love **me** enough to send his own Son, who founded a Church on a guy named Peter, who sent out these apostles to the ends of the world to proclaim the greatest news ever told, the good news that seems too good to be true, but is.
- F. He’s capable of bringing Christ and young people together so well because, like any matchmaker, he knows so well both of the people he is trying to match up.
 - 1) He’s knows Christ personally as his own living Lord and knows how His divine heart beats “to allow the children to come” to Him.
 - 2) He knows young people so well, their hopes, their fears, their dreams, their pressures, their difficulties with the faith, their enthusiasm, their generosity.
- G. In this short time we have today, we’ll focus on a few of the ways he does this matchmaking.
 - 1) I hope that this will be helpful to all of us who are young to come to recognize the great truths of Jesus’ love for them and great plans for them through some of the things mentioned here.
 - 2) I hope it will also help all of us who try to serve the young people for whom Christ died, to do so more effectively, following the successful footsteps set forth for us by the Pope of the Young.

II. Theological Juvenology

- A. I’ve entitled this talk John Paul II’s “theological juvenology,” which is a fancy way of saying the study of young people from the point of view of God. It has a starting point in God and in God’s creation, the young human being.
- B. I’m convinced, from what John Paul II has said by speeches and by his actions, as well as from my own personal experience, that all effective ministry to the young needs to start with these truths.
 - 1) Too often youth ministry starts with young people’s problems, with a particular focus on contemporary issues. This isn’t bad in itself, but it’s the same thing that juvenile offers, sociologists and psychologists do.
 - 2) John Paul II starts with Christ and the young person made in God’s image — foundational truths that are the same from generation to generation — and then applies these truths in his direct relationships with young people.
 - 3) John Paul II knows that every young person has his divine origin and vocation in God. He tries to help his younger brothers and sisters in the faith recognize this vocation and respond to it, in the midst of contemporary contexts.
- C. In the time we have, we’re going to discuss five beliefs that John Paul II firmly holds about young people and show he applies them to his interaction with them. I’ve synthesized these points from a reading of a 250 page sourcebook I’ve put together on what John Paul II has said to young people and about young people

during his pontificate. There are many other firm beliefs that guide John Paul II's work, but to begin our discussion, we can focus on these five.

- 1) Youth is time of searching for meaning of life, for happiness.
 - a) Young people by nature are searching and questioning. They're trying to determine meaning, their own personal projects, etc. Why are they here? Where are they going?
 - b) He recognizes youth is a time young people need recognition, support, to be listened to and loved. John Paul II recognizes, supports, listens to and loves them and tries to help them to see that Christ does, too, and much more so.
 - c) John Paul II often himself speaks to them by means of questions, identifying with their own questions. He often takes the perspective of a fellow searcher for the truth, rather than a definitive answer-giver. He leads them on a journey to the definitive answer-giver, Christ, and invites them to trust in Him.
 - d) The pope loves their questions, listens to them, tries to respond to them, to guide them on this search. He's convinced that if they seek for the truth, they will find the truth and find that the truth has a name, Jesus.
 - e) John Paul II opens up a dialogue with them about why they're here, what's the purpose of human life.
 - f) The Pope says that there are no easy answers, although the answers to their deepest longings have been given by Christ, though they remain mysteries.
 - g) He admits that it is hard sometimes to believe in the Gospel. He challenges them to the truth that to receive the fullness of meaning, there's a difficult path, the path of the Cross, the path of the seed falling to the ground, the path of following Christ all the way. It's the path of the beatitudes, the path of love.
 - h) He knows the truth of St. Augustine's statement about the *cor inquietum*, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in God." He tries to help the kids recognize that Jesus calls their restless hearts to rest in Him. World Youth Days are opportunities, he says, for young people to rest with Christ on the pilgrimage of life. The Pope brings young people together to remain and be refreshed by the Lord.
- 2) Maturity happens only through responsible use of freedom.
 - a) The Pope, the Holy Father, wants to raise his children to be fully-integrated, mature adults. That comes about through a responsible use of the gift of human freedom.
 - b) John Paul II always respects the freedom of young people. The Pope affirms their freedom and challenges them to use it well.
 - c) John Paul II informs young people of the real issues at stake in the use of their freedom, indicates to them the path to which Christ calls them, but then forces them to choose.
 - d) He tells them clearly what real freedom is. Real freedom is not the ability to do whatever we like, but the capacity to do what we ought to do.
 - e) He warns them about all the false prophets out there, enticing them with erroneous notions of human freedom and easy allurements.
 - f) While being a good shepherd trying to protect his lambs, he's not an *overprotective* Holy Father. He recognizes that for young people to mature, they must choose and choose well, choosing in freedom ultimately to follow Christ all the way.
 - g) There's an important theological reason for this. God created us free so that we might love, because no one can ever be forced to love. So he tries to form their freedom to choose to love.
 - h) The Pope proposes Christ and his love to young people and invites them, gives them the chance to choose Christ, the truth who will set them free. He doesn't "force" them to choose the Lord, or "scare" them to choose the Lord, but proposes the love of the Lord, the real challenge of the Gospel in all its fullness, and leaves the choice to the young people, knowing, confidently, that it corresponds to their deepest longings.
 - i) The reason why the Pope does this is that he TRUSTS young people and trusts the Lord. He knows the young people are made by the Lord to love the Lord and sees his role of opening their eyes to this love. He trusts them because Christ does. He challenges them to the responsibility that comes with freedom, and specifically to take up their role in the Church right now in the new evangelization, etc. This growth in responsibility will greatly aid their maturation in Christ.

- 3) True happiness and love will be found only in the free gift of self.
 - a) The Pope recognizes that young people search for love, but often search in all the wrong places. The Pope wants to point them to where they will truly find it, in Christ the Lord.
 - b) The Pope indicates to young people how to love, by pointing them to Christ, who first loves them and indicates by his actions and words what real love means. Jesus said during the Last Supper that “no one has any greater love than to lay down his life for his friends,” and then proved that love the next day on Calvary. True love, the greatest love, is giving of oneself to and for another.
 - c) The Pope challenges the young to give of themselves, to Christ, to others. Just as Jesus said to them, “This is my body, given for you,” the Pope calls young people to say in return to Christ, “this is my body, given for you.” This gift of oneself in love actuates a life of holiness. This gift of self, the Pope says, is seen in the priesthood, the sacrament of marriage, in consecrated life.
 - d) The plan of Christ from the beginning is for them to become the image of God who is love. This is this mission, to which they’re called, to which they’re called to call others. This is the path to true happiness, this is the point of human life.

- 4) Young people often don’t see Christ where they should.
 - a) This is a point that the Pope admits on several occasions, sometimes implicitly to young people, sometimes explicitly in his *ad limina* discourses to bishops.
 - b) For too many young people, Christ is a dead, boring historical figure.
 - c) The Pope tries to bring him alive, to show that He Lives, to show that He Loves them tremendously.
 - d) He asks bishops to present Christ as alive. He pleads with teachers and parents to do the same.
 - e) The Pope specifies various places where the Lord is alive that too many believers, young and old, don’t see or take for granted:
 - In the Eucharist — This is a “stupendous gift.” Christ is really alive in the Eucharist. The Pope calls us to adore the Lord, to receive him worthily, to become living monstrances taking Jesus on Corpus Christi processions wherever we go, by becoming one with the Living Lord through the reception of Him in Holy Communion.
 - In prayer — This is a living dialogue, a bilateral conversation of love. Christ listens to us, speaks to us.
 - In Sacred Scripture — God speaks live to us in the reading of Sacred Scripture. Like Mary, we’re called to listen to the word of God, put it into practice and treasure it so that the Word may become enfleshed in us. The Pope often in WYD addresses discusses Scripture passages with Christ and says “let’s listen to the Lord together.”
 - In Church, his bride — The Pope calls all of us to love the Church because Christ does! Christ gave himself up out of love for his bride (cf. Eph 5), to make her holy, and we’re called to follow Christ in loving her in this way. We find Christ in the Church, in the sacraments He confided to Her, in the people of the Church.
 - In others — “Whatever you do to the least of my brethren, you do to me.” Jesus identifies with others. We’re called to love him, in whatever disguise he comes to us with. The Pope singles out that we’re called to love Christ in the poor and handicapped.
 - In the struggles of youth and in Crosses — We find Christ in the Cross, which helps us to die to ourselves so that Christ may live more fully within.
 - In nature — The Pope calls this a book written by the Creator that we’re called to “read,” so as to come to know the Creator better.
 - In Confession — Where the Lord forms our consciences, forgives us and strengthens us.
 - In the other sacraments.
 - f) The Pope initiates a dialogue with them about the presence of Christ and shows by his own example that he firmly believes Christ is in each of these places.

- 5) Young people are a great gift to the Church who want to give of themselves in love to the Lord.
 - a) The Pope is certain that young people want to be challenged to love and commit themselves and hence he challenges them continually. Every address has one action item or another, to holiness, to come to the Lord in prayer, to take up the new evangelization, to become the great saints of the new millennium, to become more and more like Christ.
 - b) They are a gift to the Church because the Church finds herself in the young, especially in their enthusiasm and dedication.

- c) The Pope is convinced that the Lord spoke truly when He praised the Father for revealing to little ones the mysteries of the Kingdom." The Pope dialogues with young people to discover in them and sometimes from them these mysteries.
- d) They are a gift, a talent, that Christ has given to His Church, and the Church as a whole needs to invest that talent so that it returns 30-, 60- or 100-fold.
- e) Christ trusts the young, and so we should too. The Pope certainly does. He recognizes, though, that so many in the Church and in society don't trust the young, as if they're not capable of fulfilling serious spiritual responsibilities.
- f) The Pope helps us to see that it's part of Jesus' plan to trust us with tremendous missions and then help us to fulfill those responsibilities. He did this with the first apostles, to whom he entrusted the mission of salvation. They weren't all great candidates for this trust, but Jesus helped them fulfill those missions, when they responded to Him with trust. The Pope encourages us to do the same.
- g) The example of young saints shows that they can lead all of us in the faith.
 - The Pope is constantly proposing young saints as models for young people.
 - There were several saints proposed for WYD 2002, from all different continents, language groups, personalities.
 - His beatification of Bl. Francisco & Jacinta from Fatima shows that even the very young are capable of great holiness.
 - John Paul II particularly exalts St. Therese Lisieux, a doctor of the Church who never went to high school, because she showed us clearly the central truths of love in the heart of the Church, and seeking Jesus through the little way of humility.
- h) The Pope recognizes that the young are a great gift, who if challenged to become the saints, may indeed become those saints with the Lord's help. All of us need to challenge them by our own words and examples to take up this mission, and to be encouraged by them to whom the Lord often reveals great mysteries.

III. Pope John Paul II's Youth Lexicon

- A. In reading the Pope's speeches and writings to young people and about young people, one cannot miss how he uses certain vocabulary and expressions over and over again.
- B. The Pope puts his beliefs and ideas into practice via this vocabulary which he uses, which also influences the tone of his dialogue with young people.
- C. I'm convinced that for those who already are trying to follow in the Pope's footsteps in matchmaking young people with Christ, perhaps the easiest first step would be to start incorporating this papal, juvenological lexicon. These vocabulary words together manifest an approach to the young (on several levels, theological, psychological, paraneetical) that has borne much fruit in John Paul II's work with the young.
- D. It's my hope that these terms will become part of the daily lexicon of the Church in her interaction with the young.
- E. We can break these "most common words" down into a several categories:
 - a) Responsibility & trust
 - responsibility — He calls them to these responsibilities, not as "burdens" but as the path to true freedom and a full life. True love is only found connected to the responsibilities that love entails.
 - task — The young are not just "recipients" of the Church's pastoral care, but agents of it. They have tasks to perform that come straight from God. Every gift comes with a task.
 - Mission — Christ sends them out!
 - trust, entrusted to you — Christ trusts the young. The Church trusts the young. The Pope trusts the young.
 - "Counting on you" — Christ, the Pope, the Church is counting on the young. This implies the trust that they can fulfill it. The only thing that stops is a refusal to take up the task. The Pope occasionally says, "Don't let Christ down," before reinviting them and inspiring them to take up these responsibilities.
 - Appointment — The Pope continually reminds them of their appointments with him, their appointments with Christ. This teaches them about responsibility, keeping these appointments. It also shows that the Pope and Christ consider them important enough to book appointments with them.
 - b) Dialogue

- Dialogue — The Pope sees his interaction with the young as a dialogue, a two-way communication, in which there is mutual learning and discovery. The Pope invites them in this way into a dialogue with God in prayer and throughout all of life. The Church's pastoral care is not a classroom, but a conversation, in which Christ is the chief interlocutor.
- "You" — With the possible exception of his prayers to Mary, one of the few places that the Pope uses the second person subject pronouns (*you, tu*) is in his discussions with young people. He addresses them directly. In most other papal homilies, he does most things with third-person pronouns. This shows a tone of a conversation, one that is never condescending. Often the Pope takes the perspective of "we" (you and I) to show that they're disciples of the Lord together.
- "We," "together" — The Pope often puts himself with the young people by the use of the first-person plural, "we," (you and I) and by expressions like "together." "Together, let us listen to Jesus," "We have come here together to be with the Lord," etc. Again it's a means by which the Pope identifies with young people, puts himself in some sense at their level, and leads them from where they are to Christ. He relates to them and their questions.

c) Challenge

- Challenge — One of his most popular words. The Pope describes the challenge of the Gospel, the challenge of discipleship, how Christ challenges us, etc. It has a tone that is meant to inspire the young people to meet the challenge with God's help.
- Brave, strong, courage — The Pope uses the concept of the virtue of courage very often, challenging the young to recognize that following Christ needs these virtues. In calling them to be brave, strong, courageous, the Pope is already communicating that he knows they can be. The example of the valor of so many of his young contemporaries during the war and occupation help the Pope to see the capacity of young people for this type of bravery.
- Don't be afraid — While allied to bravery, the Pope uses the expression "don't be afraid" very often, because it goes beyond just the need courage. The Pope shows that he knows that young people have fears. Often he names those fears when he calls them not to be afraid. He challenges them not to be afraid to trust in Christ, to follow him, to be the morning watchment for the new millennium, to love purely, etc.
- Adventure — The Pope calls them to the adventure of faith. Discipleship is not boring, but invigorating. It's like a hike-up hill with Christ, up the way of the Cross. It's a particularly noble adventure. Young people are attracted naturally to these adventures, which capture their imagination. The Pope says that the faith, that following Christ, putting out into the deep trusting him, is the greatest adventure of all.

d) Freedom

- Freedom — The Pope routinely comes back to this term, which is so much used by young people today, but often misused by them. The Pope uses it to draw them to the true purpose of freedom, to do what we're called to do, to love, as Christ has taught. The Pope speaks to them where they are, with their great hunger to be free.
- Choose — The Pope challenges the young people to choose for Christ. He leaves the choice with them, after having talked about the various options, between good and evil, light and darkness, real happiness or ephemeral pleasures.
- Invite — The Pope uses the terms "invite" and "invitation," in speaking to the young people. It keeps them thinking about having to choose to accept the invitation Christ gives them, that the Pope and the Church on behalf of Christ, gives them.

e) Friendship

- Friend — The Pope calls them his dear friends and means it. Christ calls them his friends, if they do what he commands them, because he has revealed to them what He has learned from His Father. Friends are faithful to each other, listen to each other, trust each other. The Pope is a true friend to the young, and shows them thereby that Christ is. He challenges them to be faithful friends to Christ, to the Pope, to the Church, to each other.
- Accompany — From his earliest days as a priest at St. Florian's in Krakow, working with the young university students, the Pope has looked upon his mission as "accompanying" young people along the noble adventure of life. He's there with them in the joys and sorrows, the ups and downs. Christ also accompanies the young, at each step. The Pope tries to help the young open their eyes to this reality.
- Companion — The Pope says Christ is the companion of the young. The Pope for Christ is the their companion as well, and they are his. Companion comes from *com-panis*, breaking or sharing bread together, which is seen above all in the Eucharist.

f) Integrity

- Consistent — The Pope calls the young to be consistent in their living out the faith, in their being true to themselves, to the way God made them, to their deepest desires and longings. He recognizes that so often they're turned off by the hypocrisy of others. He calls them to integrity of life.

F. These terms put into concrete dialogue the Pope's beliefs about the young and about Christ. They translate his thoughts about them best. They communicate his essential messages crisply and clearly.

G. The terms themselves, the more we use them, can begin to change the whole way we interact with young people as well. My own experience in using them with young people in my work as a high school chaplain and parish priest is already showing me such efficacy.

Conclusion

- A. Ultimately John Paul II sees in young people the saints of the future. He sees in them the mystery of God's love who created them, died for them and awaits them. That's why his love for them is so palpable.
- B. He recognizes the future of the Church and the world hinges on their saying yes to the Lord, much like that 14 year old girl's yes in Nazareth changed the entire history of the world.
- C. The Pope of so many canonizations recognizes that every crisis the Church faces is a crisis of saints, and in the late 20th century and early 21st, he's calling them to be the saints that God is calling them to be, which means to reflect the light of Christ for all the world to see.
- D. In a beautiful reflection on baptism in Paris, the Pope brought everything back to their baptismal vocation to become holy, to take the light of Christ which they receive from Christ's resurrection out to the whole world, just as at the Easter Vigil we receive light from the Paschal Candle and start to light everyone else's candle, one at a time.
- E. This pope of the youth's theological juvenology is that he sees the divine potential in every person just hoping to shine through. And he's challenging each of us, no matter how young we are, to allow God to come fully alive in us.
- F. He reminds them, and today he reminds us, as he said to the million people who listened to him in Paris, "If you are what you should be, you will set the world ablaze" (St. Catherine of Siena).

Praised be Jesus Christ!