Moral Issues for Young People

Teacher Background

Young people, Pope John Paul II says, are living in a difficult age, full of enthusiasm, but also exposed to dangerous confusion. Speaking at the World Youth Day celebrations in Denver in 1993, Pope John Paul II referred to the almost universal conditions of difficulty in which young people grow up and live. Too many sufferings, he said, are visited upon them by natural calamities, famines, epidemics, by economic and political crises, by the atrocities of wars. And where material conditions are at least adequate, other obstacles arise, not the least of which is the breakdown of family values and stability. In developed countries, a serious moral crisis is already affecting the lives of many young people, leaving them adrift, often without hope, and conditioned to look only for instant gratification.

Speaking to the young people of the world in Rome in 2001, Pope John Paul II identified some of the key moral issues facing young people today. We live, he said, at a time when society is strongly influenced by models of life that give priority to possessions, pleasure and appearances in a selfish sense.

Your limited experience threatens you with the risk of falling prey to those who play on your emotions, who, instead of fostering a critical conscience in you, tend to exalt uninhibitedness and to present immoral choices as values. They blur every distinction between good and evil and present truth with the changing features of expediency.

Only by instilling a high moral vision, he said, can a society ensure that its young people are given the possibility to mature as free and intelligent human beings, endowed with a robust sense of responsibility to the common good, capable of working with others to create a community and a nation with a strong moral fibre. To educate without a value system based on truth is to abandon young people to moral confusion, personal insecurity and easy manipulation. No country, not even the most powerful, can endure if it deprives its own children of this essential good. Respect for the dignity and worth of every person, integrity and responsibility, as well as understanding, compassion and solidarity towards others, survive only if they are passed on in families, in schools and through the communications media.

Speaking to a gathering of young people in Rome in 2002, the Pope said:

There is perhaps no darkness deeper than the darkness that enters young people’s souls when false prophets extinguish in them the light of faith and hope and love. The greatest deception, and the deepest source of unhappiness, is the illusion of finding life by excluding God, of finding freedom by excluding moral truths and personal responsibility. The Lord is calling you to choose between these two voices.

In 2004, the Pope issued the address to be delivered at the World Youth Day in Cologne in 2005. In it he states:

Be worshippers of the only true God, giving Him pride of place in your lives! Idolatry is an ever-present temptation. Sadly, there are those who seek the solution to their problems in religious practices that are incompatible with the Christian faith. There is a strong urge to believe in the facile myths of success and power; it is dangerous to accept the fleeting ideas of the sacred which present God in the form of cosmic energy, or in any other manner that is inconsistent with Catholic teaching.
My dear young people, do not yield to false illusions and passing fads which so frequently leave behind a tragic spiritual vacuum! Reject the seduction of wealth, consumerism and the subtle violence sometimes used by the mass media.

Worshipping the true God is an authentic act of resistance to all forms of idolatry. Worship Christ: He is the Rock on which to build your future and a world of greater justice and solidarity. Jesus is the Prince of peace: the source of forgiveness and reconciliation, who can make brothers and sisters of all the members of the human family.

In all his addresses to young people, the Pope calls on young people to take Jesus as their model and to have faith in the light of his truth. In all the activities in this section, teachers should refer to the teachings of Jesus and gospel passages which highlight the challenge of the Christian way of life. The Evangelical Discourse in Matthew (Chs 5-7) could be read and discussed in full in the context of this module.