

The following interaction is from a question-and-answer dialogue that the Pope recently held on [February 7th](#) with his diocesan priest in Rome. This question comes from a young priest and deals with concerns of youth ministry.

**Fr Graziano Bonfitto:** Holy Father, I come from San Marco in Lamis, a village in the Province of Foggia. I am a Religious of Don Orione and have been a priest for a year and a half. I am currently parochial vicar in Ognisanti.... My priestly apostolate takes place among young people in particular. It is precisely on their behalf that I wish to thank you today. My holy



Founder, St Luigi Orione, said that young people are the sunshine or the storm of the future. I believe that at this moment in history young people are as much the sunshine as the storm, and not of tomorrow but of today, of this moment. Today, we young people feel a more pressing need than ever for certainties. We long for sincerity, freedom, justice and peace. We want beside us people who walk with us, who listen to us, just like Jesus with the disciples of Emmaus. Youth long for people who can point out the way to freedom, responsibility, love and truth. In other words, today's young people have an unquenchable thirst for Christ. It is the thirst of joyful witnesses who have encountered Jesus and have staked their whole life on him. Young people want a Church that is ever alert, ever closer to their needs. They want her to be present in the decisions of life, even if they feel a lingering sense of detachment from the Church herself.... Holy Father, - may I call you "father"? - how difficult it is to live in God, with God and for God. Young people feel threatened on many sides.... So what should be done? How should one act? Is it effectively worthwhile continuing to stake one's life on Christ? Are life, the family, love, joy, justice, respect for the opinions of others, freedom, prayer and charity still values we should defend? Is the blessed life based on the Beatitudes a life suited to human beings, to the young person of the third millennium?... Thank you.

**Pope Benedict XVI:** Thank you for this beautiful witness of a young priest who works with young people, who accompanies them, as you said, and helps them walk with Christ, with Jesus.

What can be said? We all know how difficult it is for a young person today to live as a Christian. The cultural and media context offers very different paths than the one that leads to Christ. It even seems to make it impossible to see Christ as the centre of life and to live life as Jesus showed us. However, it also seems to me that many are becoming more and more aware of the inadequacy of all that is offered, of this way of life that in the end leaves one empty.

In this regard I think that the readings of [today's liturgy](#), that of Deuteronomy (30: 15-20) and the Gospel passage from Luke (9: 22-25), correspond substantially with what we must say to young people and over and over again to ourselves. As you said, sincerity is fundamental. Young people must feel that we are not saying words we ourselves have not lived, but that we speak because we have found and seek to find anew every day the truth, as a truth for my own life. Only if we have set out in this direction, if we ourselves seek to interiorize this life and to make our lives resemble that of the Lord can our words be credible and have a visible and convincing logic. I repeat: today this is the great fundamental rule, not only for Lent but for the whole of Christian life: choose life. You have before you death and life: choose life. And I think that the answer is natural. There are only a few who in their innermost selves harbour a desire for destruction, for death, for desiring to no longer live because everything has gone wrong for them. Unfortunately, however, this phenomenon is growing. With all the contradictions and false promises, life in the end appears contradictory, no longer as a gift but a condemnation, so there are some who choose death rather than life. But usually, the human being responds: Yes, I choose life.

Yet the question as to how to find life, what to choose, how to choose life remains. And we know what is usually offered: to visit a discothèque, to take as much as possible, to see freedom as doing everything one likes, everything that springs to mind at any given moment. We know instead - and can prove it - that this road is a road of falsehood, for in the end it does not lead to finding life but indeed to the abyss of nothingness. Choose life. The same reading says: God is your life, you have chosen life and have made your



choice: God. This seems to me to be fundamental. Only in this way is our horizon sufficiently broad and only in this way are we at the source of life, which is stronger than death, stronger than all death threats. Thus, the fundamental choice is the one pointed out here: choose God. It is essential to understand that those who travel on the road without God find themselves ultimately in darkness, even if there can be moments where they seem to have found life.

Then, a further step is how to find God, how to choose God. Here we come to the Gospel: God is not an unknown Person, a hypothesis perhaps of the very beginning of the cosmos. God is flesh and blood. He is one of us. We know him by his Face, by his Name. He is Jesus Christ who speaks to us in the Gospel. He is both man and God. And being God, he chose man to enable us to choose God. Thus, we must enter into the knowledge of Jesus and then friendship with him in order to walk with him.

I think that this is the fundamental point of our pastoral care for young people, for

everyone but especially for the young: to draw attention to the choice of God who is life, to the fact that God exists - and he exists very concretely - and also to teach friendship with Jesus Christ.



There is also a third step. This friendship with Jesus is not a friendship with an unreal person, with someone who belongs to the past or who is distant from human beings, seated at God's right hand. Jesus is present in his Body, which is still a body of flesh and blood: he is the Church, the communion of the Church. We must build and make more accessible communities that reflect, that are the mirror of the great community of the vital Church. She is a whole complex of things: the vital experience of the community with all its human weaknesses but nonetheless real, with a clear path and a solid sacramental life where we can touch even what may seem so remote to us: the Lord's presence. In this way we can also learn the commandments - to return to Deuteronomy, my starting point. For the reading says: choosing God means choosing according to his words, living according to the Word. For a moment this appears almost positivistic: they are imperatives. But the first thing is the gift, it is his friendship. Then we can understand that the road signs are explanations of the reality of our friendship.

This, we can say, is a general vision in which contact with Sacred Scripture and the Church's daily life originates. It is then translated step by step into real encounters with young people: to guide them to dialogue with Jesus in prayer, in reading Sacred Scripture - especially in groups but also on their own - and in sacramental life. All these steps serve to make these experiences present in professional life, even if the context is often marked by the total absence of God and the apparent impossibility of seeing him present. However, it is precisely then, through our lives and our experience of God, that we must also seek to make Christ's presence enter this world far-removed from God.

There is a thirst for God. A short time ago I received the *ad limina* visit from some Bishops from a country where more than 50 percent of the people declare themselves to be atheists or agnostics. But they said to me: in fact, all are thirsting for God. This hidden thirst exists. Therefore, let us begin first with the young people available. Let us form communities in which the Church is reflected, let us learn friendship with Jesus. In this way, full of this joy and this experience, we can still make God present today in this world of ours.