

A Tale of Two Cities (Opening Address)

My brother bishops, observers and guests, and those who are with us by television, Charles Dickens saw good and evil at work in his own day and so came to write "A Tale of Two Cities." Like Dickens, I wish to tell a tale of two cities, a tale of cities, like our land itself, marked by contrast. A recent issue of The Washington Post tells the striking story of the shadowed side of the contrast, a story of lost hope: "Jessica Bradford is 11 years old," the story explained. "Jessica knows five people who have been killed. It could happen to her, she says.... She has known since she was in fifth grade what she wanted to wear at her funeral. 'I think my prom dress is going to be the prettiest dress of all,' Jessica said. 'When I die, I want to be dressy for my family.'" "In the last five years, 224 children younger than 18 have been killed in the District either as targets of shootings or as bystanders. The carnage has been taken in by children who live close to the gunfire, such as Jessica, and by some children removed from it. As they've mastered Nintendo... and long division, some children have sized up their surroundings and concluded that death is close at hand. So, like Jessica, they have begun planning their funerals." The story of Jessica is a story of lost hope - children who believe they've come into the world only to die violently and die young. In sharp contrast to that, through the grace of God, our nation and the world witnessed another story in another city this year - a story of hope renewed. It took place in Denver, with 186,000 young people from around the world gathered for a spiritual pilgrimage called World Youth Day. They gathered with the Gospel's words for their theme: "I came that they may have life and have it more abundantly." ' This year Denver was singled out as experiencing the same kind of open, running wounds from violence as Washington, Baltimore, and so many other cities, large and small alike. But for a few days last summer it became a city transformed. There was a sudden and dramatic reduction in violent crime; there were no murders - not a single one. It was a city filled with young people who greeted everyone cordially and left a trail of good will behind them. Those young people simply and most enthusiastically celebrated God and God's love for them. They listened and they spoke, they prayed and sang and walked - always peacefully. They spent days in serious sessions of catechetics, with Mass and other prayer. They also gave

expression to their faith in service projects. Many helped build homes for the poor and distributed food to the hungry. All assisted one another in their pilgrims' way. From more than 100 countries they showed that people of different races, colors, cultures, and languages could come together and effectively communicate their faith. The world watched and the world was amazed at the powerful image of those young people so hungry for a clarity of faith and a desire to understand the basic values which give greater meaning to their lives. The youth recognized the answer to their quest for faith and values symbolized and personified in one very special pilgrim who came from a great distance: poet, philosopher, priest, veteran of Nazi and communist oppression, witness to nearly two millennia of faith, their shepherd, the successor of the Apostle Peter, Pope John Paul II. A few weeks ago Cardinal Pironio quoted to the officers of the conference words of the Holy Father, "I used to say 'lux ex oriente' - light comes from the East, but now, after Denver, I can say also, 'lux ex occidente' - light comes from the West!" At our meeting Cardinal Pironio expressed again the appreciation of the Pontifical Council for the Laity. For him, Denver was unique, unique because so many young people took part in the catechesis, four times as many as ever before. Unique because so many bishops, especially from the United States, accompanied their young people and met with them at Den