

Joy involves discipline, freedom

ROME - Pope Benedict XVI visited a Rome juvenile detention center and told young people that true happiness involves discipline as well as freedom.

The pope celebrated Mass in the chapel of the Casal del Marmo Prison for Minors March 18, then met with the 49 young detainees in a gym. Greeting them individually, he gave each one a blessing and a rosary.

The young people, including many immigrants and non-Catholics, said they were moved by the fact that a pope would take time to visit them.

"When they told us you were coming, we were shocked. We couldn't imagine someone as important as you would come to see us," one young man said in an official greeting to the pontiff.

He said the young people at the center knew they had made mistakes, and "we know we have to pay, but the price is high and we suffer a lot."

The pope's visit brought a ray of hope and festivity to the routine at the detention center, according to officials there. The pope smiled when told that one of the girls had broken down in tears when she learned she was being released, and would miss the papal event.

The pope delivered his sermon mostly off the cuff, reviewing the Gospel parable of the prodigal son who returns home after his spendthrift habits fail to bring fulfillment.

The lesson, the pope said, is that "freedom when it is interpreted as doing as much as I want, or living only for myself" is not enough, and that life is more satisfying when lived also for others.

After reconciling with his father, the prodigal son understood that "work, humility and everyday discipline create true happiness and true freedom" and that "a life without God doesn't work," the pope said.

In this sense, the pope said, the Ten Commandments should not be understood as

obstacles to the good life, but as signposts along the right path.

The pope later reminded the youths that “whatever errors we commit, even if they are big ones, do not diminish God’s love for us.” God also offers everyone the chance to “change tracks and make a new beginning,” he said.

“The secret is to let God occupy the first place in our lives,” he said.

Before leaving, the pope told the young people he wished he could stay longer, and promised to keep them in his prayers.