

Pope urges young people to banish evils of drugs, poverty, racism

YONKERS, N.Y. – Addressing a crowd of 25,000 young people and seminarians, Pope Benedict XVI spoke of the “monster” that cast a shadow over his own childhood and urged the current generation to banish the darkness that exists today.

Speaking April 19 at a boisterous rally on the grounds of the Archdiocese of New York’s seminary in Yonkers, the pope said that while young people now enjoy democracy’s freedom, “the power to destroy does, however, remain.”

Pope Benedict offered a personal reflection on his own youth in Germany, “marred by a sinister regime that thought it had all the answers.” Nazism, he said, “banished God and thus became impervious to anything true and good.” The pope was forced to enroll in Hitler Youth as a boy but soon stopped going to meetings. Last year he said at a youth meeting in Germany that he decided to become a priest after witnessing the Nazis’ brutality.

At St. Joseph’s Seminary, the pope said the evils of substance abuse, homelessness and poverty, racism, violence and the degradation of girls and women result in people being treated as objects and the denial of God-given human dignity.

Pope Benedict called the manipulation of truth “particularly sinister.” When freedom disregards absolute truth, relegating it instead to the private sphere of the individual, relativism takes hold, he said.

Truth is neither an imposition nor a simple set of rules.

“Ultimately truth is a person: Jesus Christ,” he said.

During the meeting, young people from schools in the region presented the pope, who celebrated his 81st birthday April 16, with several gifts, including framed photographs of Sts. Elizabeth Ann Seton, Frances Cabrini and John Neumann, Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha and Venerables Pierre Toussaint and Father Felix Varela, all of whom were either born in or served in New York. He also received books on

the history of the Catholic Church in New York; bread, rice and maize, which symbolized the varied cultural background of the youth present.

The saints' diverse backgrounds and missions illustrate the breadth and possibilities of Christian discipleship, which should not be viewed through a negative prism of do's and don'ts, said the pope.

"Sometimes we are looked upon as people who speak only of prohibitions. Nothing could be further from the truth," he said.

The saints' examples also propel people to renewed social action against today's injustices, such as the environmental damage done to the earth, which "groans under the weight of consumerist greed and irresponsible exploitation," the pope said.

The rally gathered young people and seminarians, and Pope Benedict encouraged those studying for the priesthood to "reject any temptation to ostentation, careerism or conceit. Strive for a pattern of life truly marked by charity, chastity and humility, in imitation of Christ," he said.

At the end of his English remarks, the pope stood up, but an aide turned the page of his text. Laughing, the pope said, "I forgot my Spanish."

As he began reading the text, there were cheers from the crowd.

Ebi Ogbu, 22, a forensic psychology major who presented the welcome message to Pope Benedict, told Catholic News Service: "A lot of young people struggle with faith, and they get God out of their lives. There's a lot of peer pressure in terms of what the media sells, and it's hard to break away from that when everyone is doing it.

"Nobody should be afraid to let go and let God work in their lives," she said.

Ahead of the rally, pop singer Kelly Clarkson and other musicians performed at an outdoor concert against a backdrop of the risen Christ. With a cloudless sky and temperatures in the 70s, the festive atmosphere felt like the first taste of summer. Displaying one of the biggest smiles of his trip to the United States, the pope revved

up the crowd just after his late-afternoon arrival when he stepped to the edge of the stage to grab some of the outstretched hands.

The crowd also sang “Happy Birthday” in German to the pope, who gave them an “A-plus” for pronunciation.