



## Emmanuel: “God with Us”

August 16, 2000  
Rome

*This is a catechesis offered to youth on Aug. 16, 2000, at World Youth Day in Rome. The Biblical reference for the session was Isaiah 9:1-2a and 5-6.*

My job this morning is to lead a catechesis. So let me start with a question: How many of you know what the word “catechesis” means? Right, it means teaching. It comes from the ancient Greek word *katechizo*, which means “to teach by word of mouth.” Over the next few days you’re probably going to hear a lot about two big words — evangelization and catechesis — because they’re important to who we are as Christians. They’re related, but they don’t mean exactly the same thing.

When Catholics talk about “evangelization,” we usually mean the work of preaching Jesus Christ to people who don’t believe in Him, or maybe never even heard of Him. Catechesis is different. When we talk about “catechesis,” we mean the work of forming believers more deeply in the Lord. Catechesis is for people who already accept Jesus Christ . . . but who need to grow and learn more about their faith.

All of us — bishops, priests, young people, old people, parents, deacons, cardinals, religious sisters and brothers, *all of us* — need catechesis. We all need to learn more about God. We all need to learn more about our faith. Catechesis should go on throughout our lives — just like breathing. Nobody is going to wake up tomorrow and say, “You know, I’ve already done all the breathing I need . . . so now I can cut that from my schedule.” Oxygen gives life to our bodies through our lungs, and truth gives life to our souls through catechesis. So that’s our goal today.

The theme for our catechesis this morning is the word Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” Emmanuel is one of the names the Bible gives to Jesus (Mt 1:23). Jesus is “God with us” in flesh and blood. It’s a beautiful-sounding idea, isn’t it . . . but what does it really mean, and why is it important? I’m going to answer that — but I want you to be patient, because I need to do it in a round-about way.

I want to share two memories with you.

Exactly seven years ago this month, I attended World Youth Day 1993 in Denver. I wasn’t an archbishop then. I was the bishop of Rapid City, a wonderful but very poor diocese in South Dakota, and I remember being overwhelmed by the number and enthusiasm of young people who had come to Colorado from all around the world to greet the Pope. I don’t think any of the bishops in the United States expected the crowd to be so enormous. At first, none of us could believe it. The air was alive with a kind of joy and the energy — very much like the feeling we have here in Rome this week. And even today, seven years later, World Youth Day is still bearing good fruit for the Church in Colorado.

That’s the first memory. Here’s the second: A little over one year ago, I took part in the funerals of four of the young people murdered at Columbine High School. I was in the home of one of the families when they learned their son had been killed. I don’t know what it’s like to lose a child — but I *do* know what the suffering of a parent looks like. And I know those families could not have endured it without the presence of God in their lives. The bloodshed at Columbine High School wounded not just the families of the victims, but every community in Colorado.

Now, there are two lessons here.

Lesson One: *Love and goodness are real and powerful.* More than 500,000 people came together for the final Mass at World Youth Day '93. And what happened? There was no violence, no conflict, and virtually no crime. More than 200,000 foreign visitors from all around the world came to Denver that week. And what happened? They were welcomed, housed, fed and supported with no major problems. That's a miracle. You see, young people *really are* hungry for God . . . and God always responds with His presence.

Lesson Two: *Evil is also real.* Don't be fooled. Satan is not just a silly legend. Satan is real. The devil is real. Columbine High School is just a few miles from the park where Pope John Paul celebrated his closing Mass for World Youth Day '93. That's an odd kind of coincidence, isn't it. Evil hates goodness, and it will murder the innocent to prevent goodness from spreading.

In *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, the Holy Father wrote that all of us are engaged in "a struggle for the soul of the contemporary world." Christian life is a kind of "spiritual warfare" — not with guns and bombs, but with the choices we make: love against hate, virtue against sin, respect and concern for others against our own selfishness. Our choices matter. They define us. They make us who we are.

You need to ask yourselves today, right now: Who do you want to be? Whose side do you want to be on? There's no neutral zone. You can't "sit this battle out." You have to choose. And every day, every choice you make is tying you more closely to one side, or the other, in this struggle.

You know which side you *want* to be on: Your heart is already looking for the Lord, or you wouldn't be sitting here today. And God bless you for that. You give the whole Church hope — the *whole Church*, as far away as Denver . . . because when I go home, I'll share what I saw here. I'm going to talk a lot about you . . . and the young people in our Colorado parishes will know that they're not alone.

Don't be sidetracked by lies. Listen to what the Pope writes in his message for World Youth Day 2000: ". . . *may it be your holy ambition to be holy as [God] is holy.*" What does "holy" mean? Most people think that "holy" means the same thing as "good." Obviously, holy people are also good people — but they don't mean the same thing.

"Holy" comes from a Hebrew word which means *other than*. Pope John Paul is asking us to be "other than" the world; to be different from the ways of the world, which lead nowhere. Choose real freedom, not some cheap counterfeit. You can't find real freedom in drugs, or on TV, or making a lot of money, or buying a lot of stuff that just ends up as junk at the end of your life anyway. Real freedom is always rooted in the truth about the human person. And the truth about the human person is that God created each of us for a purpose . . . and we can't really be happy until we pursue that purpose. Jesus said, "You will know the truth, and *the truth* will make you free" (Jn 8:32).

Don't be afraid of the cost. Discipleship always has a price, but never, *never* fear it. Augustine Cardinal Mayer once said that, "Nothing great is ever achieved without suffering." The English preacher William Penn once wrote, "No pain, no palm; no thorns, no throne; no gall, no glory; no cross, no crown." God didn't create you to be ordinary. He created you for glory. God doesn't make "ordinary" people. He only makes heroes and saints.

That's who you are. That's the script He wrote into your heart. Life is the greatest story ever told — and none of you is meant to be a bystander, or an extra, or a bit player on the stage. Each one of you is a main character. Each one of you makes a difference. Baptism plunges *each one of you* into this struggle for the soul of the world. That's why the devil is afraid of you. That's why he wants you to settle for being tame and mediocre; ordinary and "nice."

But the world doesn't need "nice" Christians. Jesus wasn't "nice." If Jesus had been nice, the Romans would have slapped His hand — not nailed it to a cross. The Church needs Christians who are good; who are strong; who have the courage to speak and suffer for the truth; who are loyal to their Catholic faith even when it's inconvenient; and who love their friends and their enemies with all their heart . . . exactly as Jesus did. That's what the Church needs. That's what the world needs. That's the only kind of life worth living. And the reward is God Himself.

That may sound like a big challenge, but we don't have to face it alone. Remember the Gospel of Matthew, 1:23: Our God is Emmanuel. *God is with us*. Let me give you an example.

Valerie Schnurr is a young Catholic woman who was wounded in the Columbine High School massacre, but she survived. She's the *only* student we know — for sure that day — who witnessed her Christian faith to the killers before they shot her and left her for dead. Her wounds were very painful. She had a difficult recovery. But her faith and her suffering converted her father and changed her own life, and the life of her entire family, for the better. Since the Columbine tragedy, Valerie has given public talks all around the United States, and she's influenced tens of thousands of young people. Each of you, each in your own way, has the same power to turn others to Jesus Christ . . . through the example of your lives.

In the Old Testament, in the Book of Deuteronomy, God tells His people: “. . . I set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live” (Deut 30:19). The future doesn't exist until you create it with your choices. Choose well. Choose life. And how do you do that? There's only one way. You do it by choosing Jesus Christ, because Jesus tells us Himself that “I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me” (Jn 14:6).

And that brings us back to the meaning of the name Emmanuel, “God with us.” The most important question you will ever ask yourselves is this: Who is Jesus Christ? A few minutes ago we heard a reading from the Old Testament Prophet Isaiah:

*For to us a child is born; to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Is 9:6).*

Isaiah is the most important prophet of the Old Testament, because throughout his book he speaks for God about the coming of the messiah. It's no accident, in the Gospel of Luke, that when Jesus begins His public ministry in the synagogue in Nazareth, He reads from the Prophet Isaiah and says very clearly that the Scripture is now fulfilled (Lk 4:16-21). Jesus Himself is the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, because He is Emmanuel, “God with us.” He's not just a rabbi, not just another teacher, not just “a” way to the truth. He is “. . . *the way, the truth and the life*” — and He says so.

Catholics call Sacred Scripture the “Word of God.” Through Scripture, God communicates Himself to humanity. But there's a key difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Every good father knows that personal example is the most powerful teacher. And so it is with God, who is our Father in heaven. In the Old Testament, God *tells* us who He is and how we should live. In the New Testament, He *shows* us who He is and how we should live, in the person of Jesus, His son. The Gospel of John says that “the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). What does that mean? It means that in the birth of Jesus Christ, God — who is all love and all truth — speaks not just in the written word, but also by example. God becomes the flesh and blood of a man who is just like us in everything, except sin. When we look at Jesus, we see all of Sacred Scripture alive and breathing. When we look at Jesus, we see God Himself.

Why did God become man? Why does God want to be “with us?” Because He loves us and wants to redeem us. Because He made us and knows what we can be. Because He wants to restore us to the beauty and dignity He gave us before we sinned, and to share with us His mission of sanctifying the world.

The novelist Bernard Malamud once wrote that, “Without heroes, we are all plain people and don't know how far we can go.” When Mother Teresa died a few years ago, a journalist wrote that a light had gone out in the world. That's what heroes do. They light the world with their courage and example. They light a path for others to follow. Listen again to these words of Isaiah:

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined (Is 9:2).*

Who is that light? Jesus Christ — and *only* Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:12). When our Lord said “Come follow me” to the Apostles, they didn't follow Him because He had interesting ideas. They followed Jesus because they loved Him. And they loved Him because His own love illuminated the world, gave them hope and courage, and made them better than what they were.

So too with us. In the Gospel of Matthew, just before He returned to His Father, Jesus left us with a final command, and a final reassurance. Jesus *commanded* us to, "Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations . . ." (Mt 28:19). That applies to all of us. That's our vocation. If we're Christians, we're missionaries. Our job is to bring the whole world to Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ to the whole world. Nothing less will do. And if we're not in some way living our daily lives as missionaries, we shouldn't be calling ourselves Christians.

Jesus also gave us this *reassurance*, "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt 28:20). God will never abandon us. God is with us always; Jesus Christ is with us always — in Scripture, in the life of the Church, in the work of the Holy Spirit, in the love among us as Christians, and above all in the Eucharist, where we receive His real flesh and real blood. Jesus said, "I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever . . ." (Jn 6:51). The Eucharist is the body and blood of Jesus Himself, the "living bread" from heaven. The Great Jubilee is the Year of the Eucharist, because the Eucharist is Emmanuel, "God with us," every day, at every Mass.

I want to end with a story. The Ironman Triathlon is one of the toughest races in the world. The contestants begin by swimming two miles in the ocean. Then they bicycle 112 miles. Then they run a 26 mile marathon . . . all without stopping. Julie Moss entered the women's division of the Ironman Triathlon in 1982. She led the race for seven consecutive hours. Fifty feet from the finish line — that's about 16 meters — her strength gave out, and she collapsed on the pavement. She could have quit, but she didn't . . . and she refused any help because that would have disqualified her. Instead, because she couldn't move her legs, she used her hands to pull her body the last 50 feet across the asphalt to the finish line, and she won second place. When the press asked her later why she didn't give up, she said, "I don't care what people thought. I wanted to finish that race."

Heroes come in all shapes and sizes. Julie Moss was a hero. Mother Teresa was a hero. Jesus Christ was — and is — the greatest hero of all . . . and because He is with us always, you and I can be heroes and saints, too.

In the Old Testament, Psalm 119 says, ". . . I will run in the way of [the Lord's] commandments" (Ps 119:32). And in the New Testament, the Letter to the Hebrews says, ". . . let us run with perseverance the race which is set before us" (Heb 12:1).

*Now listen one more time to those words of Julie Moss: "I don't care what people thought. I wanted to finish that race." If each of you can bring just one-tenth of that young woman's desire, courage and perseverance to your love for God and the Church . . . then the whole world will change.*