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LA VALETTA - 18.04.2010 - 17.15  
Valletta Waterfront  
Meeting with the youth

### Original text

*Żgħażaġh Maltin u Ghawdxin, jien kuntent hafna li ninsab maghkom,  
[Dear young people of Malta and Gozo, I am very happy to be with you,]*

What a joy it is for me to be with you today on your native soil! On this significant anniversary, we thank God for sending the Apostle Paul to these islands, which were thus among the first to receive the Good News of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

I warmly greet Archbishop Cremona, as well as Bishop Grech whom I thank for his kind words, and all the bishops, priests and religious who are here. Most especially, I greet you, young people of Malta and Gozo, and I thank you for speaking to me of the matters that concern you most deeply. I appreciate your desire to seek and find the truth, and to know what you must do to attain the fullness of life.

Saint Paul, as a young man, had an experience that changed him for ever. As you know, he was once an enemy of the Church, and did all he could to destroy it. While he was travelling to Damascus, intending to hunt down any Christians he could find there, the Lord appeared to him in a vision. A blinding light shone around him and he heard a voice saying, "Why do you persecute me? ... I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (*Acts 9:4-5*). Paul was completely overcome by this encounter with the Lord, and his whole life was transformed. He became a disciple, and went on to be a great apostle and missionary. Here in Malta, you have particular reason to give thanks for Paul's missionary labours, which spread the Gospel throughout the Mediterranean.

Every personal encounter with Jesus is an overwhelming experience of love. Previously, as Paul himself admits, he had "persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it" (*Gal 1:13*). But the hatred and anger expressed in those words was completely swept away by the power of Christ's love. For the rest of his life, Paul had a burning desire to carry the news of that love to the ends of the earth.

Maybe some of you will say to me, Saint Paul is often severe in his writings. How can I say that he was spreading a message of love? My answer is this. God loves every one of us with a depth and intensity that we can hardly begin to imagine. And he knows us intimately, he knows all our strengths and all our faults. Because he loves us so much, he wants to purify us of our faults and build up our virtues so that we can have life in abundance. When he challenges us because something in our lives is displeasing to him, he is not rejecting us, but he is asking us to change and become more perfect. That is what he asked of Saint Paul on the road to Damascus. God rejects no one. And the Church rejects no one. Yet in his great love, God challenges all of us to change and to become more perfect.

Saint John tells us that perfect love casts out fear (cf. *1 Jn 4:18*). And so I say to all of you, "Do not be afraid!" How many times we hear those words in the Scriptures! They are addressed by the angel to Mary at the Annunciation, by Jesus to Peter when calling him to be a disciple, and by the angel to Paul on the eve of his shipwreck. To all of you who wish to follow Christ, as married couples, as parents, as priests, as religious, as lay faithful bringing the message of the Gospel to the world, I say, do not be afraid! You may well encounter opposition to the Gospel message. Today's culture, like every culture, promotes ideas and values that are sometimes at variance with those lived and preached by our Lord Jesus Christ. Often they are presented with great persuasive power, reinforced by the media and by social pressure from groups hostile to the Christian faith. It is easy, when we are young and impressionable, to be swayed by our peers to accept ideas and values that we know are not what the Lord truly wants for us. That is why I say to you: do not be afraid, but rejoice in his love for you; trust him, answer his call to discipleship, and find nourishment and spiritual healing in the sacraments of the Church.

Here in Malta, you live in a society that is steeped in Christian faith and values. You should be proud that your country both defends the unborn and promotes stable family life by saying no to abortion and divorce. I urge you to maintain this courageous witness to the sanctity of life and the centrality of marriage and family life for a healthy society. In Malta and Gozo, families know how to value and care for their elderly and infirm members, and they welcome children

as gifts from God. Other nations can learn from your Christian example. In the context of European society, Gospel values are once again becoming counter-cultural, just as they were at the time of Saint Paul.

In this Year for Priests, I ask you to be open to the possibility that the Lord may be calling some of you to give yourselves totally to the service of his people in the priesthood or the consecrated life. Your country has given many fine priests and religious to the Church. Be inspired by their example, and recognize the profound joy that comes from dedicating one's life to spreading the message of God's love for all people, without exception.

I have spoken already of the need to care for the very young, and for the elderly and infirm. Yet a Christian is called to bring the healing message of the Gospel to everyone. God loves every single person in this world, indeed he loves everyone who has ever lived throughout the history of the world. In the death and Resurrection of Jesus, which is made present whenever we celebrate the Mass, he offers life in abundance to all those people. As Christians we are called to manifest God's all-inclusive love. So we should seek out the poor, the vulnerable, the marginalized; we should have a special care for those who are in distress, those suffering from depression or anxiety; we should care for the disabled, and do all we can to promote their dignity and quality of life; we should be attentive to the needs of immigrants and asylum seekers in our midst; we should extend the hand of friendship to members of all faiths and none. That is the noble vocation of love and service that we have all received. Let it inspire you to dedicate your lives to following Christ. *La tibżghux tkunu ħbieb intimi ta' Kristu. [Do not be afraid to be intimate friends of Christ.]*

Dear young people, as I take my leave of you, I want you to know that I am close to you and I remember you and your families and friends in my prayers.

*“Selluli għaż-żgħażaġh Maltin u Ghawdxin kollha.” [“Give my greetings to all young people of Malta and Gozo.”]*

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