

**Homily for the Opening of the Vietnamese Eucharistic Youth Movement
Lake Williamson Christian Center
Carlinville, IL**

June 30, 2016

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Reverend Fathers and Deacons, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good that we are here to celebrate this Mass for the Opening of the Vietnamese Eucharistic Youth Movement. It is fitting that we come to the altar to offer our greatest act of thanksgiving and praise in our celebration of the Bread of Life, the Most Holy Eucharist.

One of the great literary works of the past century is the trilogy of books written by J.R.R. Tolkien known as *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien, a faithful Catholic, wove his faith into his writing and this masterpiece contains several religious themes. Take, for example, the main character, Frodo Baggins. As the Ring Bearer, he represents Christ who bore the burden of sin on behalf of all of humanity. The story also shows how, even in the midst of almost impossible odds, good triumphs over evil.

Another important theme that occurs throughout the books is that of friendship. Returning to Frodo, we see the faithful companionship of his

travelling partner, Samwise Gamgee. Sam does not back down in the face of trial and tribulation, but stays at the side of his friend as he journeys toward his goal of destroying the ring. We also see the friendship of characters like Legolas and Gimli take shape, an unlikely pair, as elves and dwarves did not historically get along. They set aside their differences and worked together on uniting against a common enemy, and in doing so, developed a real affection for one another.

These examples, of which most, if not all, of you are familiar, are good to reflect on as they place before us the great value of friendship in our lives as Catholics. Although it is not mentioned explicitly, our Gospel for today touches on this theme of friendship. As Jesus entered His own town, St. Matthew tells us that “there people brought to him a paralytic lying on a stretcher” (Matthew 9:2). Seeing one who was likely their friend in need, they didn’t turn away, but rather bore him up and brought him to the one who could heal him. This is a true act of friendship.

Among young people, the word ‘friend’ often has a different meaning. In our social media-driven world, so-called friends are all around us. In his message for the 43rd World Day of Communications, Pope Benedict XVI said the following about friendship:

The concept of friendship has enjoyed a renewed prominence in the vocabulary of the new digital social networks that have emerged in the last few years. The concept is one of the noblest achievements of human culture. It is in and through our friendships that we grow and develop as humans. For this reason, true friendship has always been seen as one of the greatest goods any human person can experience.¹

The Holy Father continued by cautioning against trivializing this concept of friendship, warning that:

It would be sad if our desire to sustain and develop on-line friendships were to be at the cost of our availability to engage with our families, our neighbors and those we meet in the daily reality of our places of work, education and recreation.²

As young people, you have the great opportunity to practice true friendship among your peers by not being satisfied with a simply virtual exercise of this great good. Rather, you are invited to engage with one another in a manner that respects the inherent dignity of each person by knowing them and striving to help them to understand that their life has meaning and that they are loved.

As with the friends who brought the paralytic to Jesus, you also have the opportunity to bring your friends and family members to Him by sharing with them the gifts that you have received in your Catholic faith. A true friend wants only the best for the other, and there is nothing better that we can receive than the love of Jesus, so it is our great opportunity and obligation to share this gift with those closest to us.

The New Testament speaks of this dynamic of sharing our faith with others in various ways, but one particular instance is found in the First Letter of St. Peter, where he speaks of this in the terms of stewardship. He writes: "As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace" (1 Peter 4:10).

When we speak of stewardship, we sometimes think of it in a very narrow way, focusing primarily on money. While the sharing of financial gifts is good, that is only a portion of what it means to be a steward of God's gifts. In fact, you as young people likely do not have much money that you are free to give away. What you do have to give, however, is the enthusiasm and energy of your youth, combined with your love for Jesus Christ. When these are put at the service of God and His Church,

particularly when you share that passion with your friends, you are living the life of stewardship and discipleship in a powerful and effective way.

Everything we have and all that we are comes from God's creation. We are mere stewards or caretakers of this creation. Even our faith is a gift from God. The more you generously share this gift of your faith with your friends and family now, helping to carry them to a deeper encounter of the love of God, you will be preparing yourself for your future. In their Pastoral Letter on stewardship, the bishops of the United States reflected on this point with the following words:

Stewardship can lead youth and young adults to a more mature understanding of their lives as a vocation—as a call to serve Christ and the Church as a layperson, religious, deacon, or priest. When we accept God's gifts gratefully, the experience invariably leads to new depths of discerning how the Spirit leads people to a further response to God's call.³

I hope it is therefore clear that you are at a very important time in your life, a time in which you can set yourself up for an extremely exciting and fulfilling life. It will be one that your peers may question or even doubt,

but it is one that, if lived faithfully, will yield an abundance of fruit in your lives and in the lives of countless others.

As you continue your celebration here, growing in your appreciation for the greatest gift that we have as Catholics, the Holy Eucharist, it is my prayer that your hearts will be enflamed with a greater love for your Catholic faith, a love that cannot bear to keep such a gift to oneself. May you be moved to share this gift with greater zeal, especially with those among your family and friends who are most in need of being brought to a living encounter with the love of Christ. May your sharing of this gift with others as good stewards of God's varied graces, guide you as you discern how the Lord is calling you to put your gifts at the service of the Church, all for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Message for 43rd World Day of Communication, 24 January 2009.

² Ibid.

³ USCCB, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, 2.