

Your Excellencies,  
Dear Australian Friends,

It is with great joy that I greet you today. I would like to thank the Governor-General, Major-General Michael Jeffery and Prime Minister Rudd for honouring me by their presence at this ceremony and for welcoming me so graciously. As you know, I have been able to enjoy some quiet days since my arrival in Australia last Sunday. I am most grateful for the hospitality that has been extended to me. Now I look forward to this evening's "Welcome to Country" by the indigenous people and to celebrating the great events which form the purpose of my Apostolic Visit: the Twenty-Third World Youth Day.

Some might ask what motivates thousands of young people to undertake what is for many a long and demanding journey in order to participate in an event of this kind? Ever since the first World Youth Day in 1986, it has been evident that vast numbers of young people appreciate the opportunity to come together to deepen their faith in Christ and to share with one another a joyful experience of communion in his Church. They long to hear the word of God, and to learn more about their Christian faith. They are eager to take part in an event which brings into focus the high ideals that inspire them, and they return home filled with hope and renewed in their resolve to contribute to the building of a better world. For me it is a joy to be with them, to pray with them and to celebrate the Eucharist with them. World Youth Day fills me with confidence for the future of the Church and the future of our world.

It seems particularly appropriate to celebrate World Youth Day here, since the Church in Australia, as well as being the youngest of any continent, is also one of the most cosmopolitan. Since the first European settlement here in the late eighteenth century, this country has become a home not only to generations of Europeans, but to people from every corner of the globe. The immense diversity of the Australian population today gives a particular vibrancy to what may still be considered, in comparison with much of the rest of the world, a young nation. Yet for thousands of years before the arrival of Western settlers, the sole inhabitants of the land were indigenous peoples, the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Their ancient heritage forms an essential part of the cultural landscape of modern Australia. Thanks to the Australian Government's courageous decision to acknowledge the injustices committed against the indigenous peoples in the past, concrete steps are now being taken to achieve reconciliation based on mutual respect. Rightly, you are seeking to close the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians regarding life expectancy, educational achievement and economic opportunity! This example of reconciliation offers hope to peoples all over the world who long to see their rights affirmed and their contribution to society acknowledged and promoted.

The settlers who came here from Europe have always included a significant proportion of Catholics, and we may be justly proud of the contribution they have made to the building up of the nation, particularly in the fields of education and healthcare. One of the most outstanding figures in this country's history is Blessed Mary MacKillop, at whose tomb I shall pray later this morning. I know that her perseverance in the face of adversity, her plea for justice on behalf of those unfairly treated and her practical example of holiness have become a source of inspiration for all Australians. Generations have reason to be grateful to her and to the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart and other religious congregations for the network of schools that they established here and for the witness of their consecrated life. In today's more secular environment, the Catholic community continues to make an important contribution to national life, not only through education and healthcare, but especially by highlighting the spiritual dimension of the questions that feature prominently in contemporary debate.

With many thousands of young people visiting Australia at this time, it is appropriate to reflect upon the kind of world we are handing on to future generations. In the words of your

national anthem, this land “abounds in nature’s gifts, of beauty rich and rare”. The wonder of God’s creation reminds us of the need to protect the environment and to exercise responsible stewardship of the goods of the earth. In this connection I note that Australia is making a serious commitment to address its responsibility to care for the natural environment. Likewise with regard to the human environment, this country has generously supported international peace-keeping operations, contributing to conflict resolution in the Pacific, in South-East Asia and elsewhere. Owing to the many religious traditions represented in Australia, this is particularly fertile ground for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. I look forward to meeting local representatives of different Christian communities and other religions during my stay, so as to encourage this important work, a sign of the reconciling action of the Spirit who impels us to seek unity in truth and charity.

First and foremost, though, I am here to meet the young, from Australia and from all over the world, and to pray for a renewed outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon all those taking part in our celebrations. The theme chosen for World Youth Day 2008 is taken from words spoken by Jesus himself to his disciples, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles: “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be my witnesses to the ends of the earth” (1:9). I pray that the Holy Spirit will bring spiritual renewal to this land, to the Australian people, to the Church throughout Oceania and indeed to the ends of the earth. Young people today face a bewildering variety of life-choices, so that they sometimes find it hard to know how best to channel their idealism and their energy. It is the Spirit who gives the wisdom to discern the right path and the courage to follow it. He crowns our poor efforts with his divine gifts, just as the wind filling the sails sweeps the ship forward, far surpassing what the oarsmen can achieve through their laborious rowing. In this way, the Spirit enables men and women in every land and in every generation to become saints. Through the Spirit’s action, may the young people gathered here for World Youth Day have the courage to become saints! This is what the world needs more than anything else.

Dear Australian friends, once again I thank you for your generous welcome and I look forward to spending these days with you and with the young people of the world. May God bless all who are present, all the pilgrims and all who live in this land. And may he always bless and protect the Commonwealth of Australia.

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Benedict XVI