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## Theme 2024



Youth，Pilgrims of Hope


## Youth, Pilgrims of Hope


Theme for Youth Ministry in the Malankara Syrian Catholic Church

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## Youth, Pilgrims of Hope

The drastic effects on human minds, created by wars and natural calamities that disorder the beautiful world created by God are more severe than we think. The world has not yet relieved from the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic. The truth is that the clouds of despair, that filled in human hearts during the Covid period, have not yet disappeared. It is the young mind that were more affected by this despair. In this context, Holy Father Pope Francis exhorted in the message given on $38^{\text {th }}$ world Youth Day in the year 2023 that youth, who are the hope of Church and society have to become pilgrim who 'rejoice in hope.'

Christian life is rooted in Christ, sustained in hope and lived in love and Charity. It is full of hope, with its foundation in the risen Christ. Among the divine virtues, hope is a timely relevant virtue. The theme for guiding the youth activities in the Malankara Syrian Catholic Church in 2024 is 'Youth, Pilgrims of Hope.' This means that hope should prevail in the journeying together (Synodality) of the youth who ought to light the contemporary world. The goal of their pilgrimage together is to be Joy filled with hope.

## 1. The foundation of Hope is Christ

The world that we live is a complex one with mixed emotions. On the one hand, there are realties that stir the hopes and dreams of young people: the splendour of God's creation, our relationships with friends and loved ones, our encounters with art and culture, science and technology, and our efforts to work for peace, justice and fraternity, among other things. On the other hand, there are tough life experiences that pull one into deep despair, fear and depression, such as wars,
violent conflicts, bullying and other kinds of hardships. It is these contradictory life experiences that compel youth to raise the question, "where is hope?" A question asked by Job who went through the furnace of suffering and resonated with many youths, "Where then is my hope? Who will see my hope?"(Job 17:15).

The experience of being within the prison of darkness evokes the thought that rays of hope will not rise in our lives. The increase in suicide among the youth is a visible sign of bitter disappointment. Our youth quickly decide to end their life, having lost the dream of hoping for tomorrow.

It is in solitude that we experience the intensity of despair: with no one to talk or to listen to us. The experience of loneliness in the crowd drags us into suffocating despair. Pope Benedict XVI says: "When no one listens to me anymore, God still listens to me. When I can no longer talk to anyone or call upon anyone, I can always talk to God" (Pope Benedict XVI, Spe Salvi, 32). There is God who listens to me and talks with me in any context. It is God whom I meet at the end of my thoughts and imaginations. The is the foundation of our Hope.

Christ was born as the golden light of hope in a world that was in the darkness of sin. It is Christ, fully God and fully man, who showers the rays of hope in our hearts. The hope instilled in us by Christ, who is powerful to transform any situation and experience of despair, gives us eternal bliss. Hence the Church teaches that Christ is the foundation of our hope.

To possess hope in Christ youth should focus on Him. We shall not keep our eyes open to the destruction and wickedness of the world. Rather, our vision should be fixed on Christ, who is powerful enough to transform everything. We have to believe firmly that there is a power in Christ, who conquered sin, death and Satan through the eternal sacrifice offered on Calvery, that can transform all negative experiences; a God who breaks all tombs that build fortress to darkness. He is not far, but
near. He is Emmanuel. Hence Pope Francis, in his message, reminds all young people: "Jesus makes his presence felt amid these crosses borne by young people; he offers them his friendship, his consolation and his healing companionship." Christ is with us in all situations that the youth confront, even if they are too hard, as a friend. He consoles us and fortifies us in our journey ahead. Nothing else but this is our hope.

## 2. Prayer is the Setting of Hope

Only those who encounter risen Christ can grow in the experience of hope. It is in the prayer that we recognize and experience the active presence of Christ in the world. The setting of hope is always prayer. In fact, the reason why one cannot come out of despair is the absence of prayer. Those who forsake God and divine activities can never encounter Christ or overcome the challenges with hope. In this era, the reason for slipping and falling into despair for the youth is nothing but the absence of a prayer life.

We may have community prayer at our parish churches as well as at home, but do we have personal prayer? It is a dialogue between Christ and myself. In fact, the spiritual convictions are evolved only if I have personal prayer along with community prayers. It is to be remembered that most of our challenges in life are very personal and it should be faced by the person himself but with spiritual convictions. It is the love bond with Jesus, nurtured through personal prayer, that helps us to confront any difficult situations and equips us to transform any experience of despair into hope and joy. Unfortunately, the people ofnew generation are easily distracted from a life of silence and personal prayer. So, let us find time every day to build a personal relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ through personal spiritual activities.

## 3. Discover ourselves in Christ

In order to rejoice in hope, each person should encounter Christ personally. Sometimes, convictions are likely to decrease if one flows
with the crowd. This encounter is not only about discovering Christ but also a process of discovering ourselves in Christ. We see that many youths encounter Christ but return to their old lives without discovering themselves in Him. In Gospels we read about the rich young man who encountered Christ during his public ministry (Mt. 19:16-30). He, who was hesitant to undergo self-discovery in Christ, walked away from that life-changing encounter. He could not comprehend the truth that Jesus spoke - that he has more value than the wealth he considered to be precious in life. He neglected like grass the precious words of Jesus to renounce what was, in truth, hieh are valueless in life. Today, too, youths easily succumb to such temptations.

The only person who lived fully as a human in this world without the stains of sins is Christ, the perfect God. We find the real man in Christ. That is, man who lives in situations of sin has to look to Christ to discover his identity. We have to discover ourselves in Christ. The proper answer to the philosophical question, 'who am I?' is that each man is nothing but another Christ (Alter Christus), that means each man is made in the image of Christ. When we reflect it little deeper, it is clear that another Christ is Christ himself (Alter Christus ipse Christus). God chose us his sons in Christ (Eph 1:3-4). Young people who lost their sense of identity in life should definitely find their image in Christ. For that, be ready to return to Christ.

## 4. Hope, a call to become new creation.

A person who discovers oneself cannot but become a new creation. Whenever one looks at Christ, he/she can find a gap between what I am and what I have to be. In fact, it is our self-discovery in Christ. This realization is the first step toward self-transformation. Put in another way, those with a mindset for self-transformation can discover themselves in Christ. This means that those who recognize the need for integral transformation in their life-routine but cannot accept it may walk back to their old life.

The prophets of hope are not those who walk back due to a sense of loss but walk ahead in hope. In the history of the Church, we can see many who enlightened the surroundings of their life with the light of hope. In the history of modern era, Mother Teresa, honoured by the whole world, was a star that shone like a little lamp in the darkness of despair. That young girl was surrounded by the presence of wombs that denied the right to be born, orphans who could not find space in the love of parents, and old people exhausted on the streets - stark realities of life capable enough to instill despair within her. Perhaps, if she had focussed only on those things, she would also fallen into darkness of despair. But her eyes were focussed on the Christ who is broken every day in the Altar. In silent prayer, she discovered herself in Christ. She recognized the 'call with in the call' to become a beacon of hope in the darkness of despair. Since then, she was doing the pilgrimage of hope through the streets of Calcutta, spreading the joy of hope in many lives. This is what we say to be new creation in Christ.

## 5. Rejoice in Hope (Rom 12:12)

The plot of the story of Chapter 12 of Letter to the Romans is the exhortation of St. Paul to the Church in Roma regarding the new lifestyle to be followed in the new life routine began in Christ. The life we have is God's mercy given to us. Remembering this divine mercy, we have to lead life without conformity to the world. In this exhortation, we see St. Paul's conviction that a life that indulges in worldly pleasures would not be pleasing to God: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Rom 12:2). Only those who overcome the temptation to conform with the world can enjoy the heavenly happiness. To rejoice in hope, we should always stand against those powers of the body which pull us into despair and the feeling of lost.

St. Paul gives this exhortation to the Church of Rome to encourage an ecclesial community undergoing severe persecution. When thinking
humanly, it is quite natural for them to resonate in their hearts the question, 'where is real happiness?' as they undergo the persecution of throbbing pain in the body and confront death face to face. For this, his answer is "rejoice in hope." When the youth gathered in Madrid in 2011, Pope Benedict XVI asked the same question to the young people: "Where does joy come from? How is it to be explained?" The Pope's answer is also clear: "Certainly, there are many factors at work here. But the crucial one is this certainty based on faith: I am wanted. I have a task in history. I am accepted, I am loved." The realization that I have a mission to fulfill in this world guides me to the conviction that it is the need of others that I should exist. The hope that each one has to keep in heart is that I have to be in this world in any circumstance.

I am not unwanted. My being in this world is not accidental; rather, it is part of the divine plan. I am wanted by God, my brothers and sisters, my friends, my companions, my colleagues, my neighbours, and all whom I meet. The joy that fills in me when I am acceptable to others and loved by others is the happiness in hope. In short, happiness in me becomes perfect when I am valued.

## 6. Hope that blossoms in Love

Can individuals, things, incidents of this world determine the price of me, who is created in the image and likeness of God? What sets my price? Is it the smart phone that I use or motorcycle or Car that I ride? If the answer is yes, then, when such things are not received or lost, young people will be filled with great disappointment. The young people who quarrel with their parents for material things and end their lives, value life less than the material things they are willing to die for. Saying 'no' to one's life because love is not received from the loved ones, or as they are lost forever, the youth leave scars of pain that can never be healed in the hearts of their loving parents and brothers. In fact, the truth is that the beacon of hope inside such young people is fading. The
youth should always ask themselves that can those who love me for the sake of need determine the value of my life? Can they love me without limitations or conditions? Is my life finished, when such love is not received?

It is Christ who sets the perfect price and perfectly loves the person that I am. That is why St. Paul, the Apostle, speaks to Ephesians eloquently about, "the love that encompasses knowledge" (Eph 3:19). The real happiness sprouts from pure love. Happiness will be imperfect in relationships and experiences without love. Only those who love me can value myself. Those who value myself can love me without conditions. It is the real happiness that we experience there.
It is natural that when others' love for me diminishes, they value me less than what I am. Only God can accept and love me unconditionally. Because of this, we say that God's love is the foundation of my hope and love. This is not worldly knowledge, but a life conviction that we recognize in faith. "Ultimately, we need a sense of being accepted unconditionally. Only if God accepts me and I become convinced of this, do I know definitively: it is good that I exist... It is good to be a human being, even in hard times. Faith makes one happy from deep within" (Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia, 22 December 2011). In short, in daily life that gives different experiences of despair and hope, the source of happiness that we enjoy in our depth is nothing but Christ.

## 7. Hope that overcome Challenges

Amidst the different life experiences that a person undergoes, where is the beauty of life? Does my life in this world end with my life experiences? Does my life's purpose end in times of crisis or experiences of negativity? Only those who look through the eyes of hope and not of the world can enjoy the beauty of life. That means, when we look at all life realities that we undergo as part of God's plan, then we can understand the truth of faith that God, who can generate goodness and happiness even
from the experiences of evil, is with us. This fundamental conviction of our faith life helps us to overcome any challenge that create any amount of despair.

## 8. Hope is a Pilgrimage

Dear youth, our journeying together is not backward but always forward. It is a pilgrimage to the new dawn of hope. There are experiences of disappointment, collapse, and pain in the stories told by many lives that we encounter daily. But the story of resurrection only speaks about the experiences of happiness and hope. The happiness that we experience in encountering the risen Christ transforms us. Thus, we can fill our surroundings with the joy of hope. It is a pilgrimage; a journey in hope and happiness; a pilgrimage of discovering our worth. It is a life journey that instils in me the conviction that my living in this world is a need for myself and others. It is in this pilgrimage together that we realize that God loves us and our world without conditions.

## 9. Hope is a Divine Virtue

Hope is a virtue that enlightens our faith and love. It is the hope that gives splendour to all other virtues. Without hope, we will always be mourning and aching. However, when there is hope in us, we will be cheerful and energetic. Hence, not to lose the radiance of youthhood, youth should be always full of hope. Holy Father Pope Francis says: "Hope is humble, little, yet essential." Hope is not simple one; rather, it is an unavoidable element of our faith life. Hope is not only oftomorrow, but also the courage to face the troubles of today for tomorrow and a prudence of not ending life amidst of today's pains. Today's hard work fortifies tomorrow's hope. So those who are lazy cannot enjoy happiness in hope.

## a. Hope is not running away

To find the quality of hope, look at Holy Saturday, which comes between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. After completing his mission on the
painful Friday, Jesus waited peacefully on Saturday for the dawn of the great Sunday. This is the hope that we see in Christ. It is a hope of hard work and dreams. This is the hope needed for youth today. Likewise, the prayer of Jesus at Gethsemane (Mt 26:36-46) shall not be taken as words of disappointment. The desire that "Let this cup pass from me" (Mt 26:36; Mk 14:36; Lk 22:42) is only the first part of prayer. It is in its second part that shows the hope that is in Christ: "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." The pilgrimage to Calvery is a path that Jesus has voluntarily chosen, realizing that when his sufferings are attached to the plan of Father, the salvific plan of Father is fulfilled. This is why Jesus Christ was clam on this pilgrimage route.

It was the hope inside that helped Christ to be calm within the flames of suffering. Jesus knew that his life would not end at Calvary and even when it had to be brought down to the bottom of hell, the glory of resurrection would arrive in due time. No power can destroy the plan of God. Sometimes, there may be delay in its completion. A person can never think of sacrifice at Calvery if there is no happiness of hope given by the Resurrection. Those who run away from the realities of life can never enjoy the happiness of hope.

## b. Hope is not inactivity

The foundation of Christian hope lies in the conviction that God's intervention can take place at any time, even when the experience of disappointment is intense. We shall not use the virtue of hope to escape from the divine mission of transforming the painful experiences in our surroundings. The thought that our efforts are in vain make us lazy and passive. Our call to cooperate with the divine plan creatively is included in hope. It is the conviction that there is a God who perfects our labours that generates happiness in hope. Hence, youth should work in this world as a Church, in our efforts together with Holy Spirit, to lead the world to goodness.

## c. Hope is Light

To look at a thing or person in light is not the same as looking at it in darkness. When we look at the world in light, not only does light fill us inside, but we also receive the energy to do the works of light. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, teaches about the light that radiates around us through our deeds with hope (Mt 5:16). Hence, in the situations of disappointment, we could look around with the insight of hope. The hope that fills us while encountering the risen Christ is the light of our life. This is the light of hope that helps us see ourselves and others. It is this hope that makes us "sons of light" (Jn 12:36).

## d. Hope is Sharing

The fear and despair filled the hearts of the disciples during Paschal events inspired them to withdraw themselves to their own lives and run away from their mission. However, when the experience of Pentecost filled them with hope they came out to share with the world the spiritual joy that they experienced. They cannot but share the joy of hope. Neither persecution nor death could prevent them from sharing the joy that they experienced. Not only in churches and places of worship but they shared the Good News of joy in prisons, streets, market places, and tea shops. We read in the Acts of Apostles about the disciples who were in ecstasy of sharing when encountering risen Christ and receiving the anointing by the Holy Spirit.

## e. Hope lived in Charity

We live hope in love, and that should be adorned with virtuous acts. Acts of charity are the visible signs of Christian hope. When the works of charity are accomplished through us, the hope that we experience in Christ becomes a light in the lives of our brethren who lives in situations of despair. It is thus hope becomes the light of today. It is for this reason that the church exhorts the youth to participate in the works of fraternity and divine mercy.

## f. Hope is the taste of life

Youth are wandering to enjoy life, seeking tasty food, new vehicles, colourful dresses, interesting sports, cinema, etc. Such things that we select for enjoyment eventually become boring after some time since those things do not and cannot give us lasting fulfilment. There are youth around us who, in the end, return in despair after wandering to find taste in life. Then, where do we find real taste of our life? Holy Father Pope Francis qualifies hope as the taste of life. "Hope is the salt of our daily lives." It is hope that gives taste to life experiences. To make youthhood savour the virtue of hope is unavoidable. How can we live without hope? Life becomes hard for a person who has no hope. We have to become people of hope to find happiness amidst of life experiences, mixed with joy and sorrow.

## 10. Let us Remember

The pilgrimage of hope is a call; moreover, it is a challenge. It is a pilgrimage of the youth that has to be undertaken as a Church. Hope is not just the expectation for tomorrow but the light of today. It is the energy of today. It is today's happiness. The call of Christ's youth is to become prophets of hope.

## Go ahead...

Receive Christ, the light of the world, as our hope inside...
Become the prophets of hope in the world of joy and sorrow...
Become the beacons of hope in the paths of darkness...
Become the lighthouse of goodness in the world of evils...
Become the sons of light to share the hope...
Be the salt that gives taste to others' ${ }^{\prime}$ life...
Be guiding lights to others...

