

## Ongoing Formation 2023

### Pope Francis' parable of the hand five fingers Meeting with Young People and Catechists

Kinshasa, 2nd February 2023

I would like to ask you, for a little while, not to look at me but to look at your hands. Open the palms of your hands. Look at them closely. Dear friends, God has placed the gift of life, the future of society and the future of this great country in those hands of yours. Dear brother, dear sister, do your hands not seem small and frail, empty and unsuited to so great a task? Let me tell you something: **your hands all look alike, but none of them is exactly the same.** No one has hands just like yours, and that is a sign that you are a unique, unrepeatable and incomparable treasure. No one in history can replace you. So ask yourself, what are my hands for? For building up or for tearing down, for giving or for grabbing, for loving or for hating? Notice how you can squeeze your hand, closing it to make a fist. Or you can open it, to offer it to God and to others. That has always been the fundamental choice we have to make, ever since ancient times, ever since the days when Abel generously offered the fruits of his labour, while Cain “raised his hand against his brother... and killed him” (*Gen 4:8*). Young people, you who dream of a different future: **from your hands, tomorrow can be born; from your hands, peace** so lacking in this world can at last come about. Yet what are we to do concretely? I would like to suggest some “ingredients for the future”: five of them, each corresponding to a finger on your hand.

#### 1. To the thumb, prayer

**The thumb, the finger closest to our heart, symbolizes prayer**, which is the driving force in our life. Prayer may seem like something unreal and far from our concrete problems and issues. Yet prayer is the primary ingredient, the basic ingredient for the future, because by ourselves we cannot go very far. We are not all-powerful and, whenever we think we are, we end up failing miserably. Think of a tree, if we take away its roots. Even if that tree is large and robust, it cannot remain standing on its own. This is why we need to sink our roots in prayer and in listening to the word of God. Prayer is what allows us to grow deeply, day by day, to bear fruit, and to turn the tainted air we breathe into life-giving oxygen. Every tree needs one simple and basic element if it is to grow. That element is water. Prayer is “water for the soul”: it is hidden, unseen, yet it gives life. Those who pray grow inwardly; they are able to lift their gaze on high and to remember that we are made for heaven.

Dear brother, dear sister, **we need prayer, a living prayer.** Do not speak to Jesus like some far-off being who inspires awe and fear, but rather as your best friend, someone who has given his life for you. Jesus knows you, he believes in you and he loves you, always. When you contemplate him hanging on the cross for your salvation, you will come to see how precious you are to him. You can entrust to him your crosses, your fears, your anxieties, casting them upon his cross. He will embrace them all. He did this two thousand years ago; the cross you are carrying today was already a part of his cross. Do not be afraid, then, to take a cross in your hands, to press it to your heart, and to hand over all your tears to Jesus. And do not forget to contemplate his face, the face of a God who is young, alive and risen!

Yes, Jesus has triumphed over evil; he made of his cross the bridge to the resurrection. So, raise your hands to him daily, praise him and bless him. Tell him the hopes of your heart, share with him the deepest secrets of your life: the person you love, the hurts you carry within, the dreams that you hold in your heart. Tell him about your neighbours, your teachers, your friends and colleagues; tell him about your country. God loves this kind of living, concrete and heartfelt prayer. It allows him to intervene, to enter into your daily life in a special way, to come with his “power of peace”. That power has a name. Do you know who it is? It is the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the Giver of life. The Holy Spirit is the driving force of peace, the true power of peace. That is why **prayer is the most powerful weapon there is.** It brings you the consolation and hope that come from God. It

always opens up new possibilities and helps you overcome all your fears. Yes, prayer conquers fear and enables us to take our future into our hands. Do you believe this? Do you want to make prayer your secret, as refreshing water for the soul, as the one weapon you carry, as a travelling companion on each day's journey?

## **2. To the index finger, community**

Now let us look at the second finger, the forefinger. **We use our index finger to point things out to others. Others, the community: this is the second ingredient.** Dear friends, do not ruin your youth by becoming isolated and closed in on yourselves. Think about this often and you will find happiness, because community is the way to make us feel good about ourselves and to be faithful to our true calling. Going it alone may seem enticing, but it ends up leaving us only with great emptiness. Think about drugs: you end up hiding yourself from others, from an authentic life, for the sake of feeling all-powerful; but ultimately you find yourself deprived of everything. Think too about addiction to the occult and witchcraft. This form of dependency imprisons us in fear, vengeance and anger. Do not yield to illusions that promise happiness, sand castles built on appearances, easy money or distorted forms of religion.

**Beware of the temptation to point a finger at someone, to exclude another person because he or she is different;** beware of regionalism, tribalism, or anything that makes you feel secure in your own group, but at the same time is unconcerned with the life of the community. You know what happens: first, you believe in prejudices about others, then you justify hatred, then violence, and in the end, you find yourself in the middle of a war. But let me ask you something. Have you ever spoken with people from other groups or have you always kept to yourself? Have you ever heard other people's stories or drawn near to their sufferings? Certainly, it is easier to condemn people than to understand them; but God's method of building a better world is to embrace those we think of as "other", to identify with them, to connect as a community. That is what it means to build up the Church: to broaden our horizons, to see others as our neighbours and to care about them. Do you see someone lonely, suffering or left out? Approach him or her. Not because you want that person to see what a nice person you are, but to share your smile and to offer your friendship.

David, you mentioned that **young people want to be connected to others, but that social media often confuses you.** It is true, virtual reality is not enough, we cannot be content just interfacing with people who are far away and sometimes not even real. Life is more than just tapping a screen with a finger. It is sad to see young people spending hours staring at a phone; then, if you look at their faces, you see that they are not smiling, that they look weary and bored. Nothing and no one can ever be a replacement for the energy that we get from being together, the sparkle in our eyes, the joy of exchanging ideas! Talking, listening to each other is essential: on the screen, everyone scrolls down for what they find interesting. So try to spend time together and experience the beauty of letting others amaze you with their stories and their experiences.

Let us now try to feel very concretely what it means to build community. Just for a few moments, hold hands with whoever is beside you. Imagine yourselves as one Church, a single people. **Realize that your own welfare depends on the welfare of others,** which is multiplied by the whole. Have a sense of what it means to be protected by your brother and sister, by someone who accepts you as you are and is concerned about you. And know that you are responsible for others, as a vital part of a great fraternal network in which everyone supports everyone else, and that you are indispensable. Yes, you are indispensable and responsible for your Church and your country. You are part of a greater history, one that calls you to take an active role as a builder of communion, a champion of fraternity, an indomitable dreamer of a more united world.

You are not alone in this adventure: the whole Church, throughout the world, is cheering for you. Is it a difficult challenge? Yes, but you can rise to it. **You also have some friends in the stands who are encouraging you towards these goals. Do you know who they are? The saints in heaven.** I think, for example, of **Blessed Isidore Bakanja**, of **Blessed Marie-Clémentine**

**Anuarite**, and of **Saint Kizito** and his companions. They were witnesses of the faith, martyrs who never succumbed to the logic of violence, but proclaimed by their lives the power of love and forgiveness. Their names, written in heaven, will long endure in history, whereas narrow-mindedness and violence will always turn against those who practise them. I know you have repeatedly shown that, even at great sacrifice, you are ready to stand up to defend human rights and the hope of a better future for everyone in the country. I thank you for this and I honour the memory of all those – and they are many – who have lost their lives or their health for these noble causes. And I encourage you to go forward together, fearlessly, as a community!

### **3. To the middle finger, honesty**

Prayer and community; we come to the third finger, which is higher than the others, as if to remind us of something essential. **It is the key ingredient for a future worthy of our great expectations.** And that is: *honesty!* To be a Christian is to witness to Christ. The first way to do this is by living virtuously, as Christ desires. This means not getting entangled in the snares of corruption. Christians cannot fail to be honest; otherwise, they betray their identity. Without honesty, we are not disciples and witnesses of Jesus; we are pagans, idolaters who worship our own ego rather than God, people who use others rather than serving them.

I wonder, though – **how do we stop the spread of corruption, that seems never to stop expanding?** Saint Paul helps us with a simple and brilliant phrase that you can say to yourselves over and over, until you know it by heart. Here it is: **“Do not be overcome by evil; but overcome evil with good”** (Rom 12:21). *Do not be overcome by evil.* Do not let yourselves be manipulated by individuals or groups that try to use you to keep your country in the grip of violence and instability, so that they can continue to control it without answering to anyone. *But overcome evil with good.* May you be the ones who transform society, the ones who turn evil into good, hatred into love, war into peace. Do you want to be that kind of person? If you do, then it is possible. Do you know why? Because each one of you has a treasure that no one can steal from you. It is your power to make choices. In fact, you *are* the choices you make, and you can always choose to do the right thing. We have the freedom to choose. Do not let your life be dragged along by the current of corruption. Do not let yourselves be borne along like dead branches in a contaminated river. Be indignant, but never give in to the persuasive but poisonous temptations of corruption.

I think of the **witness given by a young person like yourselves, Floribert Bwana Chui**, who fifteen years ago, at only twenty-six years old, was killed in Goma for having blocked the passage of spoiled foodstuffs that would have been harmful for people’s health. He could easily have turned a blind eye; nobody would have found out, and he might even have gotten ahead as a result. But, since he was a Christian, he prayed. He thought of others and he chose to be honest, saying no to the filth of corruption. That is what it means to keep your hands clean, for hands that traffic in easy money get stained with blood. If someone offers you a bribe, or promises you favours and lots of money, do not fall into the trap. Do not be deceived; do not be sucked into the swamp of evil. *Do not be overcome by evil!* Do not trust shady financial schemes that plunge you into the darkness. To be honest is to shine like the day; it is to radiate the light of God. It is to live the beatitude of justice: *overcome evil with good!*

### **4. To the ring finger, forgiveness**

Now we have reached the fourth finger, the ring finger, on which wedding rings are worn. If you think about it, the ring finger is also the weakest finger, the one that is the hardest for us to raise. It reminds us that the goals that bring us the greatest fulfilment in life, above all love, involve weakness, weariness and hardship. These have to be accepted, confronted with patience and trust, without letting ourselves get weighed down by pettiness, as, for example, when the beautiful symbolism of a dowry is reduced purely to a financial arrangement. In our frailty and in our moments of crisis, what is the power that makes us go forward? *Forgiveness.* Because **forgiving means being able to start over.** To forgive does not mean forgetting the past; it means refusing to

repeat it. To forgive is to change the course of history. It is to raise up those who have fallen. It is to accept the idea that no one is perfect and that everyone, not just myself, has the right to make a new start.

Dear friends, **to create a new future we need to give and receive forgiveness.** That is what Christians do: they do not merely love those who love them, but they choose to halt the spiral of personal and tribal vendettas with forgiveness. I think, for example, of **Blessed Isidore Bakanja**, your brother who was brutally tortured because he refused to conceal his piety and proposed Christianity to other young people. He never yielded to feelings of hatred and, as he gave up his life, he forgave his torturer. Those who forgive bring Jesus even to places where he is not welcomed; they bring love to places where love is rejected. Those who forgive build the future. But how do we become capable of forgiveness? By first allowing ourselves to be forgiven by God. Every time we confess our sins, we receive in our hearts the power that changes history. God always forgives us, always and freely! And we are then told, as the Gospel says: to “go and do likewise” (*Lk 10:37*). Go forth without resentment, without venom, without hatred. Go forth and make God’s ways your own, for he alone can renew history. Go forth and believe that we can always begin again with God. We can always start over, we can always forgive!

### **5. To the little finger, service**

Prayer, community, honesty, forgiveness. We have now come to the last and smallest finger. You may be tempted to say: But I am so little, and whatever good I can do is but a drop in the ocean. But it is precisely littleness, our decision to become little, that attracts God. The key here is *service*. Those who serve make themselves little. Like a tiny seed, they seem to be swallowed up in the earth, and yet they bring forth fruit. Jesus tells us that service is the force that transforms the world. **So the little question that you can tie on this finger each day is: *What can I do for others?*** In other words, how can I serve the Church, my community, my country? Olivier, you told us that, in some isolated regions, you, the catechists, daily serve the faith communities and that, in the Church, this should be “everyone’s business”. It is true, and it is a beautiful thing to serve others, to care for them, to do something without expecting anything in return, as God does with us. I would like to thank you, dear catechists: for so many communities, you are as vital as water; always help them to grow by the integrity of your prayer and your service. To serve is not to sit idly by; it is to get up and go. Many get up and go because they want to pursue their own interests. Do not be afraid, yourselves, to pursue goodness, to invest in goodness and to proclaim the Gospel, preparing yourselves enthusiastically and suitably, and initiating long-term projects. And do not be afraid to make your voices heard, because in your hands is not only the future, but the present as well. Be at the centre of the present moment!

Dear friends, **I have left you five words to help you to discern**, amid all the many attractive messages you hear, what is really important in life. For in life, as in driving, disorder and confusion often create unnecessary traffic jams that waste our time and energy, and fuel anger. Rather, we do well, even amid confusion, to give our hearts and lives clarity, to make realistic plans and have stable points of reference, in order to set out for a different kind of future, refusing to heed the empty promises of opportunism. Dear friends, young people and catechists, I thank you for what you do and for who you are. Thank you for your enthusiasm, your light and your hope! Now I would like to tell you one last thing: **never grow discouraged! Jesus believes in you and he will never leave you stranded.** Hold fast to the joy that you feel today; never let it fade. As Floribert told his friends when they were feeling low: “Take the Gospel and read it. It will console you; it will give you joy”. All of you, together, leave behind the pessimism that paralyzes. The Democratic Republic of the Congo expects from your hands a different future, for that future is in your hands. May your country once more become, thanks to you, a garden of fraternity, the heart of peace and freedom in Africa! Thank you!