



# The Holy See

---

**LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II  
TO ALL THE PRIESTS  
ON THE OCCASION OF HOLY THURSDAY 1979**

*Dear Brother Priests,*

**1. For you I am a Bishop, with you I am a Priest**

AT THE BEGINNING of my new ministry in the Church, I feel the deep need to speak to you, to all of you without any exception, Priests both diocesan and religious, who are my brothers by virtue of the sacrament of Orders. From the very beginning I wish to express my faith in the vocation that unites you to your Bishops, in a special communion of sacrament and ministry, through which the Church, the mystical Body of Christ, is built up. To all of you therefore, who, by virtue of a special grace and through a singular gift of our Saviour, bear "the burden of the day and the heat" (cf. Mt 20:12) in the midst of the many tasks of the priestly and pastoral ministry, I have addressed my thoughts and my heart from the moment when Christ called me to this See, where Saint Peter, with his life and his death, had to respond until the end to the question: Do you love me? Do you love me more than these others do? (cf. Jn 21:15ff.).

I think of you all the time, I pray for you, with you *I seek the ways of spiritual union and collaboration*, because by virtue of the sacrament of Orders, which I also received from the hands of my Bishop (the Metropolitan of Cracow, Cardinal Adam Stephen Sapieha, of unforgettable memory), you are my brothers. And so, adapting the words of Saint Augustine, (*Vobis enim sum episcopus, vobiscum sum Christianus: Serm. 340, 1: PL 38, 1483*). I want to say to you today: "For you I am a Bishop, with you I am a Priest". Today, in fact, there is a special circumstance that impels me to confide to you some thoughts that I enclose in this Letter: it is the nearness of Holy Thursday. It is this, the annual feast of our priesthood, that unites the whole Presbyterium of each Diocese about its Bishop in the shared celebration of the Eucharist. It is on this day that all Priests are invited to renew, before their own Bishop and together with him, the promises they made at their priestly Ordination; and this fact enables me, together with all my Brothers in the Episcopate, to be joined to you in a special unity, and especially to be in the very heart of the mystery of Jesus Christ, the mystery in which we all share.

The Second Vatican Council, which so explicitly highlighted the collegiality of the Episcopate in the Church, also gave a new form to the life of the priestly communities, joined together by a special bond of brotherhood, and united to the Bishop of the respective local Church. The whole priestly life and ministry serve to deepen and strengthen that bond; and a particular responsibility for the various tasks involved by this life and ministry is taken on by the Priests' Councils, which, in conformity with the thought of the Council and the Motu Proprio *Ecclesiae Sanctae* (cf. I art. 15) of Paul VI, should be functioning in every diocese. All this is meant to ensure that each Bishop, in Union with his Presbyterium, can serve ever more effectively the great cause of evangelization. Through this service the Church realizes her mission, indeed her very nature. The importance of the unity of the Priests with their own Bishop on this point is confirmed by the words of Saint Ignatius of Antioch: "Strive to do all things in the harmony of God, with the Bishop presiding to represent God, the presbyters representing the council of the apostles, and the deacons, so dear to me, entrusted with the service of Jesus Christ" (*Epistula ad Magnesios*, VI, 1: *Patres Apostolici* I, ed. Funk, p. 235).

## ***2. Love for Christ and the Church unites us***

It is not my intention to include in this Letter everything that makes up the richness of the priestly life and ministry. In this regard I refer to the whole tradition of the Magisterium and of the Church, and in a special way to the doctrine of the Second Vatican Council, contained in the Council's various documents, especially in the Constitution *Lumen Gentium* and the Decrees *Presbyterorum Ordinis* and *Ad Gentes*. I also wish to recall the Encyclical of my Predecessor Paul VI *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*. Finally, I wish to place great importance upon the Document *De Sacerdotio Ministeriali*, which Paul VI approved as the fruit of the labours of the 1971 Synod of Bishops, because I find in this Document—although the session of the Synod that elaborated it had only a consultative form—a statement of essential importance regarding the specific aspect of the priestly life and ministry in the modern world.

Referring to all these sources, which you are familiar with, I wish in the present Letter *only to mention a number of points* which seem to me to be of extreme importance at this moment in the history of the Church and of the world. These are words that are dictated to me by my love for the Church, which will be able to carry out her mission to the world only if—in spite of all human weakness—she maintains her fidelity to Christ. I know that I am addressing those whom only the love of Christ has enabled, by means of a specific vocation, to give themselves to the service of the Church and, in the Church, to the service of man for the solution of the most important problems, and especially those regarding man's eternal salvation.

Although at the beginning of these considerations I refer to many written sources and official documents, nevertheless I wish to refer especially to that living source which is our shared love for Christ and his Church, a love that springs from the grace of the priestly vocation, the love that is the greatest gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom 5:5; 1 Cor 12:31; 13).

### 3. "Chosen from among men... appointed to act on behalf of men" (Heb 5:1)

The Second Vatican Council deepened the idea of the Priesthood and presented it, throughout its teaching, as the expression of the inner forces, those "dynamisms", whereby the mission of the whole People of God in the Church is constituted. Here one should refer especially to the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, and reread carefully the relevant paragraphs. The mission of the People of God is carried out through the sharing in the office and mission of Jesus Christ himself, which, as we know, has a triple dimension: it is the mission and office of Prophet, Priest and King. If we analyse carefully the conciliar texts, it is obvious that one should speak of a triple dimension of Christ's service and mission, rather than of three different functions. In fact, these functions are closely linked to one another, explain one another, condition one another and clarify one another. Consequently, it is from this threefold unity that our sharing in Christ's mission and office takes its origin. As Christians, members of the People of God, and subsequently, as priests, sharers in the hierarchical order, we take our origin from the combination of the mission and office of our Teacher, who is Prophet, Priest and King, in order to witness to him in a special way in the Church and before the world.

*The priesthood in which we share through the sacrament of Orders, which has been for ever "imprinted" on our souls through a special sign from God, that is to say the "character", remains in explicit relationship with the common priesthood of the faithful, that is to say the priesthood of all the baptized, but at the same time it differs from that priesthood "essentially and not only in degree" (Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 10). In this way the words of the author of the Letter to the Hebrews about the priest, who has been "chosen from among men... appointed to act on behalf of men" (Heb 5:1), take on their full meaning.*

At this point, it is better to reread once more the whole of this classical conciliar text, which expresses the basic truths on the theme of our vocation in the Church: "Christ the Lord, high priest taken from among men (cf. Heb 5:1), made the new people 'a kingdom of priests to God, his Father' (Rev 1:6, cf. 5:9-10). The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated to be a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, that through all the works of Christian men they may offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the perfection of him who has called them out of darkness into his marvellous light (cf. 1 Pt 2:4-10). Therefore all the disciples of Christ, persevering in prayer and praising God together (cf. Acts 2:42-47), should present themselves as a sacrifice, living, holy and pleasing to God (cf. Rom 12:1). They should everywhere on earth bear witness to Christ and give an answer to everyone who asks a reason for the hope of an eternal life which is theirs (cf. 1 Pt 3:15).

Though they differ essentially and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are none the less ordered one to another; each in its own proper way shares in the one priesthood of Christ. The ministerial priest, by the sacred power that he has, forms and rules the priestly people; in the person of Christ he effects the Eucharistic

Sacrifice and offers it to God in the name of all the people. The faithful indeed, by virtue of their royal priesthood, participate in the offering of the Eucharist. They exercise that priesthood, too, by the reception of the sacraments, prayer and thanksgiving, the witness of a holy life, abnegation and active charity" (Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 10).

#### 4. *The Priest as a gift of Christ for the Community*

We must consider down to the smallest detail not only the theoretical meaning but also the existential meaning of the mutual "relation" that exists between the hierarchical priesthood and the common priesthood of the faithful. The fact that they differ not only in degree but also in essence is a fruit of a particular aspect of the richness of the very priesthood of Christ, which is the one centre and the one source both of that participation which belongs to all the baptized and of that other participation which is reached through a distinct sacrament, which is precisely the sacrament of Orders. This sacrament, dear Brothers, which is specific for us, which is the fruit of the special grace of vocation and the basis of our identity, by virtue of its very nature and of everything that it produces in our life and activity, serves to make the faithful aware of their common priesthood and to activate it (cf. Eph 4:1-12): the sacrament reminds them that they are the People of God and enables them "to offer spiritual sacrifices" (cf. 1 Pt 2:5), through which Christ himself makes us an everlasting gift to the Father (cf. 1 Pt 3:18). This takes place, above all, when the priest "by the sacred power that he has... in the person of Christ (*in persona Christi*) effects the Eucharistic Sacrifice and offers it to God in the name of all the people", (Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 10) as we read in the conciliar text quoted above.

Our sacramental priesthood, therefore, is a "hierarchical" and at the same time "ministerial" priesthood. It constitutes a special *ministerium*, that is to say "service", in relation to the community of believers. It does not however take its origin from that community, as though it were the community that "called" or "delegated". The sacramental priesthood is truly a gift for this community and comes from Christ himself, from the fullness of his priesthood. This fullness finds its expression in the fact that Christ, while making everyone capable of offering the spiritual sacrifice, calls some and enables them to be ministers of his own sacramental Sacrifice, the Eucharist—in the offering of which all the faithful share—in which are taken up all the spiritual sacrifices of the People of God.

Conscious of this reality, we understand how our priesthood is "hierarchical", that is to say connected with the power of forming and governing the priestly people (cf. Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 10) and *precisely for this reason "ministerial"*. We carry out this office, through which Christ himself unceasingly "serves" the Father in the work of our salvation. Our whole priestly existence is and must be deeply imbued with this service, if we wish to effect in an adequate way the Eucharistic Sacrifice *in persona Christi*.

The priesthood calls for a particular integrity of life and service, and precisely such integrity is

supremely fitting for our priestly identity. In that identity there are expressed, at the same time, the greatness of our dignity and the "availability" proportionate to it: it is a question of the humble readiness to accept the gifts of the Holy Spirit and to transmit to others the fruits of love and peace, to give them that certainty of faith from which derive the profound understanding of the meaning of human existence and the capacity to introduce the moral order into the life of individuals and of the human setting.

Since the priesthood is given to us so that we can unceasingly serve others, after the example of Christ the Lord, the priesthood cannot be renounced because of the difficulties that we meet and the sacrifices asked of us. Like the apostles, we have left everything to follow Christ (cf. Mt 19:27); therefore we must persevere beside him also through the Cross.

### ***5. In the service of the Good Shepherd***

As I write, there pass before the eyes of my soul the vast and varied areas of human life, areas into which you are sent, dear Brothers, like labourers into the Lord's vineyard (cf. Mt 20:1-16). But for you there holds also the parable of the flock (cf. Jn 10:1-16), for, thanks to the priestly character, you share in the *pastoral charism*, which is a sign of a special relationship of *likeness to Christ, the Good Shepherd*. You are precisely marked with this quality in a very special way. Although care for the salvation of others is and must be a task of every member of the great community of the People of God, that is to say also of all our brothers and sisters who make up the laity—as the Second Vatican Council so amply declared (cf. Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 11)—nevertheless you Priests are expected to have care and commitment which are far greater and different from those of any lay person. And this is because your sharing in the priesthood of Jesus Christ differs from their sharing, "essentially and not only in degree" (Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 10).

In fact, the priesthood of Jesus Christ is the first source and expression of an unceasing and ever effective care for our salvation, which enables us to look to him precisely as the Good Shepherd. Do not the words "the good shepherd is one who lays down his life for his sheep" (Jn 10:11) refer to the Sacrifice of the Cross, to the definitive act of Christ's priesthood? Do they not show all of us that Christ the Lord, through the sacrament of Orders, has made us sharers in his Priesthood, the road that we too must travel? Do these words not tell us that our vocation is a singular *solicitude for the salvation of our neighbour*, that this solicitude is a special *raison d'être* of our priestly life; that it is precisely this solicitude that gives it meaning, and that only through this solicitude can we find the full significance of our own life, perfection and holiness? This theme is taken up, at various places, in the conciliar Decree *Optatam Totius* (cf. 8-11;19-20).

However, this matter becomes more comprehensible in the light of the words of our same Teacher, who says: "For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it but anyone who loses his life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (Mk 8:35). These are mysterious words,

and they seem like a paradox. But they cease to be mysterious if we try to put them into practice. Then the paradox disappears, and the profound simplicity of their meaning is fully revealed. May all of us be granted this grace in our priestly life and zealous service.

**6. "The supreme art is the direction of souls"** (Saint Gregory the Great, *Regula Pastoralis*, I, 1: PL 77, 14)

The special care for the salvation of others, for truth, for the love and holiness of the whole People of God, for the spiritual unity of the Church—this care that has been entrusted to us by Christ, together with the priestly power, is exercised in various ways. Of course there is a difference in the ways in which you, dear Brothers, fulfill your priestly vocation. Some in the ordinary pastoral work of Parishes; others in mission lands; still others in the field of activities connected with the teaching, training and education of youth, or working in the various spheres and organizations whereby you assist in the development of social and cultural life; yet others near the suffering, the sick, the neglected, and sometimes, you yourselves bed-ridden and in pain. These ways differ from one another, and it is just impossible to name them all one by one. They are necessarily numerous and different, because of the variety in the structure of human life, in social processes, and in the heritage and historical traditions of the various cultures and civilizations. Nevertheless, within all these differences, *you are always and everywhere the bearers of your particular vocation*: you are bearers of the grace of Christ, the eternal Priest, and bearers of the charism of the Good Shepherd. And this you can never forget; this you can never renounce; this you must put into practice at every moment, in every place and in every way. In this consists that "supreme art" to which Jesus Christ has called you. "The supreme art is the direction of souls", wrote Saint Gregory the Great.

I say to you therefore, quoting these words of his: strive to be "artists" of pastoral work. There have been many such in the history of the Church. They speak to each of us, for example, Saint Vincent de Paul, Saint John of Avila, the holy Curé d'Ars, Saint John Bosco, Blessed Maximilian Kolbe, and many, many others. Each of them was different from the others, was himself, was the son of his own time and was "up to date" with respect to his own time. But this "bringing up to date" of each of them was an original response to the Gospel, a response needed precisely for those times; it was the response of holiness and zeal. There is no other rule apart from this for "bringing ourselves up to date", in our priestly life and activity, with our time and with the world as it is today. Without any doubt, the various attempts and projects aimed at the "secularization" of the priestly life cannot be considered an adequate "bringing up to date".

### **7. Steward and witness**

The priestly life is built upon the foundation of the sacrament of Orders, which imprints on our soul the mark of an indelible character. This mark, impressed in the depths of our being, has its "personalistic" dynamism. *The priestly personality must be for others a clear and plain sign and*

*indication*. This is the first condition for our pastoral service. The people from among whom we have been chosen and for whom we have been appointed (cf. Heb 5:1) want above all to see in us such a sign and indication, and to this they have a right. It may sometimes seem to us that they do not want this, or that they wish us to be in every way "like them"; at times it even seems that they demand this of us. And here one very much needs a profound "sense of faith" and "the gift of discernment". In fact, it is very easy to let oneself be guided by appearances and fall victim to a fundamental illusion in what is essential. Those who call for the secularization of priestly life and applaud its various manifestations will undoubtedly abandon us when we succumb to temptation. We shall then cease to be necessary and popular. Our time is characterized by different forms of "manipulation" and "exploitation" of man, but we cannot give in to any of these ("Let us not deceive ourselves in thinking we serve the Gospel, if we try 'to dilute' our priestly charism...": Pope John Paul II, *Discourse to the Clergy of Rome* [9 November 1978], no. 3: "L'Osservatore Romano" [10 November 1978], p. 2). In practical terms, the only priest who will always prove necessary to people is the priest who is conscious of the full meaning of his priesthood: the priest who believes profoundly, who professes his faith with courage, who prays fervently, who teaches with deep conviction, who serves, who puts into practice in his own life the programme of the Beatitudes, who knows how to love disinterestedly, who is close to everyone, and especially to those who are most in need.

Our pastoral activity demands that we should be close to people and all their problems, whether these problems be personal, family or social ones, but it also demands that we should be close to all these problems "in a priestly way". Only then, in the sphere of all those problems, do we remain ourselves. Therefore if we are really of assistance in those human problems, and they are sometimes very difficult ones, then we keep our identity and are really faithful to our vocation. With great perspicacity we must seek, together with all men, truth and justice, the true and definitive dimension of which we can only find in the Gospel, or rather in Christ himself. Our task is to serve *truth and justice* in the dimensions of human "temporality" but *always in a perspective* that is the *perspective of eternal salvation*. This salvation takes into account the temporal achievements of the human spirit in the spheres of knowledge and morality, as the Second Vatican Council wonderfully recalled (cf. Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 38-39, 42), but it is not identical with them, and in fact it goes higher than them: "The things that no eye has seen and no ear has heard... all that God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9). Our brethren in the faith, and unbelievers too, expect us always to be able to show them this perspective, to become real witnesses to it, to be dispensers of grace, to be servants of the word of God. They expect us to be men of prayer.

Among us there are also those who have united their priestly vocation in a special way with an intense life of prayer and penance in the strictly contemplative form of their Religious Orders. Let them remember that their priestly ministry also in this form is—in a special way—"ordered" to the great solicitude of the Good Shepherd—solicitude for the salvation of every human being.

And this we must all remember: that it is not lawful for any of us to deserve the name of "hireling", that is to say, the name of one "to whom the sheep do not belong", one who, "since he is not the shepherd and the sheep do not belong to him, abandons the sheep and runs away as soon as he sees the wolf coming, and then the wolf attacks and scatters the sheep; this is because he is only a hired man and has no concern for the sheep" (Jn 10:12-13). The solicitude of every good shepherd is that all people "may have life and have it to the full", (Jn 10:10) so that none of them may be lost, (cf. Jn 17:12) but should have eternal life. Let us endeavour to make this solicitude penetrate deeply into our souls; let us strive to live it. May it characterize our personality, and be at the foundation of our priestly identity.

### ***8. Meaning of celibacy***

Allow me at this point to touch upon the question of priestly celibacy. I shall deal with it summarily, because it has already been considered in a profound and complete way during the Council, and subsequently in the Encyclical *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, and again at the ordinary session of the 1971 Synod of Bishops. This reflection has shown itself to be necessary both in order to present the matter in a still more mature way, and also in order to explain even more deeply the meaning of the decision that the Latin Church took so many centuries ago and to which she has sought to be faithful, and desires to maintain this fidelity also in the future. The importance of the question under consideration is so great, and its link with the language of the Gospel itself so close, that in this case we cannot reason with categories different from those used by the Council, the Synod of Bishops and the great Pope Paul VI himself. We can only seek to understand this question more deeply and to respond to it more maturely, freeing ourselves from the various objections that have always—as happens today too—been raised against priestly celibacy, and also freeing ourselves from the different interpretations that appeal to criteria alien to the Gospel, to Tradition and to the Church's Magisterium—criteria, we would add, whose "anthropological" correctness and basis in fact are seen to be very dubious and of relative value.

Nor must we be too surprised at all the objections and criticisms which have intensified during the post conciliar period, even though today in some places they seem to be growing less. Did not Jesus Christ, after he had presented the Disciples with the question of the renunciation of marriage "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven", add these significant words: "Let anyone accept this who can"? (Mt 19:12). The Latin Church has wished, and continues to wish, referring to the example of Christ the Lord himself, to the apostolic teaching and to the whole Tradition that is proper to her, that *all those who receive the sacrament of Orders should embrace this renunciation "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven"*. This tradition, however, is linked with respect for different traditions of other Churches. In fact, this tradition constitutes a characteristic, a peculiarity and a heritage of the Latin Catholic Church, a tradition to which she owes much and in which she is resolved to persevere, in spite of all the difficulties to which such fidelity could be exposed, and also in spite of the various symptoms of weakness and crisis in individual priests. We are all aware that "we have this treasure in earthen vessels" (cf. 2 Cor 4:7); yet we know very well that it is



precisely a treasure.

Why is it a treasure? Do we wish thereby to reduce the value of marriage and the vocation to family life? Or are we succumbing to a Manichean contempt for the human body and its functions? Do we wish in some way to devalue love, which leads a man and a woman to marriage and the wedded unity of the body, thus forming "one flesh"? (Gen 2:24; cf. Mt 19:6). How could we think and reason like that, if we know, believe and proclaim, following Saint Paul, that marriage is a "great mystery" in reference to Christ and the Church? (cf. Eph 5:32). However, none of the reasons whereby people sometimes try to "convince us" of the inopportuneness of celibacy corresponds to the truth, the truth that the Church proclaims and seeks to realize in life through the commitment to which Priests oblige themselves before ordination. The essential, proper and adequate reason, in fact, is contained in the truth that Christ declared when he spoke about the renunciation of marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, and which Saint Paul proclaimed when he wrote that each person in the Church has his or her own particular gifts (cf. 1 Cor 7:7). Celibacy is precisely a "gift of the Spirit". A similar though different gift is contained in the vocation to true and faithful married love, directed towards procreation according to the flesh, in the very lofty context of the sacrament of Matrimony. It is obvious that this gift is fundamental for the building up of the great community of the Church, the People of God. But if this community wishes to respond fully to its vocation in Jesus Christ, there will also have to be realized in it, in the correct proportion, that other "gift", the gift of celibacy "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 19:12).

Why does the Latin Catholic Church link this gift not only with the life of those who accept the strict programme of the evangelical counsels in Religious Institutes but also with the vocation to the hierarchical and ministerial priesthood? She does it because celibacy "for the sake of the kingdom" is not only an eschatological sign; it also has a great social meaning, in the present life, for the service of the People of God. Through his celibacy, the Priest becomes the "man for others", in a different way from the man who, by binding himself in conjugal union with a woman, also becomes, as husband and father, a man "for others", especially in the radius of his own family: for his wife, and, together with her, for the children, to whom he gives life. The Priest, by renouncing this fatherhood proper to married men, seeks another fatherhood and, as it were, even another motherhood, recalling the words of the Apostle about the children whom he begets in suffering (cf. 1 Cor 4:15; Gal 4:19).

These are children of his spirit, people entrusted to his solicitude by the Good Shepherd. These people are many, more numerous than an ordinary human family can embrace. The pastoral vocation of priests is great, and the Council teaches that it is universal: it is directed towards the whole Church, (cf. Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 3, 6, 10,12) and therefore it is of a missionary character. Normally, it is linked to the service of a particular community of the People of God, in which each individual expects attention, care and love. The heart of the priest, in order that it may be available for this service, must be free. Celibacy is a sign of a freedom that exists for the sake of service. According to this sign, the hierarchical or "ministerial" priesthood is, according to the

tradition of our Church, more strictly "ordered" to the common priesthood of the faithful.

### ***9. Test and responsibility***

The often widespread view that priestly celibacy in the Catholic Church is an institution imposed by law on those who receive the sacrament of Orders is the result of a misunderstanding, if not of downright bad faith. We all know that it is not so. Every Christian who receives the sacrament of Orders commits himself to celibacy with full awareness and freedom, after a training lasting a number of years, and after profound reflection and assiduous prayer. He decides upon a life of celibacy only after he has reached a firm conviction that Christ is giving him this "gift" for the good of the Church and the service of others. Only then does he commit himself to observe celibacy for his entire life. It is obvious that such a decision obliges not only by virtue of a law laid down by the Church but also by virtue of personal responsibility. It is a matter here of *keeping one's word to Christ and the Church*. Keeping one's word is, at one and the same time, a duty and a proof of the priest's inner maturity; it is the expression of his personal dignity. It is shown in all its clarity when this keeping one's promise to Christ, made through a conscious and free commitment to celibacy for the whole of one's life, encounters difficulties, is put to the test, or is exposed to temptation—all things that do not spare the Priest, any more than they spare any other Christian. At such a moment, the individual must seek support in more fervent prayer. Through prayer, he must find within himself that attitude of humility and sincerity before God and his own conscience; prayer is indeed the source of strength for sustaining what is wavering. Then it is that there is born a confidence like the confidence expressed by Saint Paul in the words: "There is nothing that I cannot master with the help of the One who gives me strength" (Phil 4:13). These truths are confirmed by the experience of many Priests and proved by the reality of life. The acceptance of these truths constitutes the basis of fidelity to the promise made to Christ and the Church, and that promise is at the same time the proof of genuine fidelity to oneself, one's own conscience, and one's own humanity and dignity. One must think of all these things especially at moments of crisis, and not have recourse to a dispensation, understood as an "administrative intervention", as though in fact it were not, on the contrary, a matter of a profound question of conscience and a test of humanity. God has a right to test each one of us in this way, since this earthly life is a time of testing for every human being. But God also wishes us all to emerge victorious from such tests, and he gives us adequate help for this.

Perhaps, not without good reason, one should add at this point that the commitment to married fidelity, which derives from the sacrament of Matrimony, creates similar obligations in its own sphere; this married commitment sometimes becomes a source of similar trials and experiences for husbands and wives, who also have a way of proving the value of their love in these "trials by fire". Love, in fact, in all its dimensions, is not only a call but also a duty. Finally, we should add that our brothers and sisters joined by the marriage bond *have the right to expect from us*, Priests and Pastors, good example and *the witness of fidelity to one's vocation until death*, a fidelity to the vocation that we choose through the sacrament of Orders just as they choose it through the

sacrament of Matrimony. Also in this sphere and in this sense we should understand our ministerial priesthood as "subordination" to the common priesthood of all the faithful, of the laity, especially of those who live in marriage and form a family. In this way, we serve in "building up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:12); otherwise, instead of cooperating in the building up of that body we weaken its spiritual structure. Closely linked to this building up of the body of Christ is the authentic development of the human personality of each Christian—as also of each Priest—a development that takes place according to the measure of the gift of Christ. The disorganization of the spiritual structure of the Church certainly does not favour the development of the human personality and does not constitute its proper testing.

### ***10. Every day we have to be converted anew***

"What must we do, then?" (Lk 3:10): dear Brothers, this seems to be your question, just as the disciples and those who listened to Christ the Lord asked him so often. What must the Church do, when it seems that there is a lack of Priests, when their absence makes itself felt especially in certain countries and regions of the world? How are we to respond to the immense needs of evangelization, and how can we satisfy the hunger for the Word and the Body of the Lord? The Church, which commits herself to maintaining priestly celibacy as a particular gift for the kingdom of God, *professes faith in and expresses hope in* her Teacher, Redeemer and Spouse, and at the same time in him who is "Lord of the harvest" and "giver of the gift" (Mt 9:38; cf. 1 Cor 7:7). In fact, "every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" (James 1:17). We for our part cannot weaken this faith and confidence with our human doubting or our timidity.

In consequence, we must all be converted anew every day. We know that this is a fundamental exigency of the Gospel, addressed to everyone (cf. Mt 4:17; Mk 1: 15), and all the more do we have to consider it as addressed to us. If we have the duty of helping others to be converted we have to do the same continuously in our own lives. Being converted means returning to the very grace of our vocation; it means meditating upon the infinite goodness and love of Christ, who has addressed each of us and, calling us by name, has said: "Follow me". Being converted means continually "giving an account" before the Lord of our hearts about our service, our zeal and our fidelity, for we are "Christ's servants, stewards entrusted with the mysteries of God" (1 Cor 4:1). Being converted also means "giving an account" of our negligences and sins, of our timidity, of our lack of faith and hope, of our thinking only "in a human way" and not "in a divine way". Let us recall, in this regard, the warning that Christ gave to Peter himself (cf. Mt 16:23). Being converted means, for us, seeking again the pardon and strength of God in the sacrament of Reconciliation, and thus always beginning anew, and every day progressing, overcoming ourselves, making spiritual conquests, giving cheerfully, for "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor 9:7).

Being converted meant to pray continually and never lose heart" (Lk 18:1). *In a certain way prayer is the first and the last condition for conversion*, spiritual progress and holiness. Perhaps in these recent years—at least in certain quarters—there has been too much discussion about the

priesthood, the priest's "identity", the value of his presence in the modern world, etc., and on the other hand there has been too little praying. There has not been enough enthusiasm for actuating the priesthood itself through prayer, in order to make its authentic evangelical dynamism effective, in order to confirm the priestly identity. It is prayer that shows the essential style of the priest; without prayer this style becomes deformed. Prayer helps us always to find the light that has led us since the beginning of our priestly vocation, and which never ceases to lead us, even though it seems at times to disappear in the darkness. Prayer enables us to be converted continually, to remain in a state of continuous reaching out to God, which is essential if we wish to lead others to him. Prayer helps us to believe, to hope and to love, even when our human weakness hinders us.

Prayer likewise enables us continually to rediscover the dimensions of that kingdom for whose coming we pray every day, when we repeat the words that Christ taught us. Then we realize *what our place is in the realization of the petition: "Thy kingdom come"*, and we see how necessary we are in its realization. And perhaps, when we pray, we shall see more easily those "fields... already white for harvest" (Jn 3:35) and we shall understand the meaning of Christ's words as he looked at them: "So ask the Lord of the harvest to send labourers to his harvest" (Mt 9:38).

We must link prayer with continuous work upon ourselves: this is the *formatio permanens*. As is rightly pointed out by the Document on this theme issued by the Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, (cf. Circular Letter of 4 November 1969: AAS 62 (1970), pp. 123 ff.) this formation must be both interior, that is to say directed towards the deepening of the priest's spiritual life, and must also be pastoral and intellectual (philosophical and theological). Therefore since our pastoral activity, the proclamation of the Word and the whole of the priestly ministry depend upon the intensity of our interior life, that activity must also find sustenance in assiduous study. It is not enough for us to stop at what we once learned in the seminary, even in cases where those studies were done at university level, which the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education resolutely recommends. This process of intellectual formation must last all one's life, especially in modern times, which are marked—at least in many parts of the world by the widespread development of education and culture. To the people who enjoy the benefits of this development we must tell them, convincingly and effectively, of the hope that gives us life (cf. 1 Pt 3:15). And this also forms part of the process of daily conversion to love, through the truth.

Dear Brothers: you who have borne "the burden of the day and the heat" (Mt 20:12), who have put your hand to the plough and do not turn back (cf. Lk 9:62), and perhaps even more those of you who are doubtful of the meaning of your vocation or of the value of your service: think of the places where people anxiously await a Priest, and where for many years; feeling the lack of such a Priest, they do not cease to hope for his presence. And sometimes it happens that they meet in an abandoned shrine, and place on the altar a stole which they still keep, and recite all the prayers of the Eucharistic liturgy; and then, at the moment that corresponds to the transubstantiation a deep silence comes down upon them, a silence sometimes broken by a sob... so ardently do they desire to hear the words that only the lips of a Priest can efficaciously utter. So much do they

desire Eucharistic Communion, in which they can share only through the ministry of a priest, just as they also so eagerly wait to hear the divine words of pardon: *Ego te absolvo a peccatis tuis!* So deeply do they feel the absence of a Priest among them!... Such places are not lacking in the world. So if one of you doubts the meaning of his priesthood, if he thinks it is "socially" fruitless or useless, reflect on this!

We must be converted every day, we must rediscover every day the gift obtained from Christ himself in the sacrament of Orders, by penetrating the importance of the salvific mission of the Church and by reflecting on the great meaning of our vocation in the light of that mission.

### **11. Mother of Priests**

Dear Brothers, at the beginning of my ministry I entrust all of you to the Mother of Christ, who in a special way is our Mother: the Mother of Priests. In fact, the beloved disciple, who, as one of the Twelve, had heard in the Upper Room the words "Do this in memory of me" (Lk 22:19), was given by Christ on the Cross to his Mother, with the words: "Behold your son" (Jn 19:26). The man who on Holy Thursday received the power to celebrate the Eucharist was, by these words of the dying Redeemer, given to his Mother as her "son". All of us, therefore, who receive the same power through priestly Ordination have in a certain sense a prior right to see her as our Mother. And so I desire that all of you, together with me, should find in Mary the Mother of the priesthood which we have received from Christ. I also desire that you should entrust your priesthood to her in a special way. Allow me to do it myself, *entrusting to the Mother of Christ* each one of you—without any exception—in a solemn and at the same time simple and humble way. And I ask each of you, dear Brothers, to do it yourselves, in the way dictated to you by your own heart, especially by your love for Christ the Priest, and also by your own weakness, which goes hand in hand with your desire for service and holiness. I ask you to do this.

The Church of today speaks of herself especially in the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*. Here too, in the last chapter, she proclaims that she looks to Mary as to the Mother of Christ, because she calls herself a mother and wishes to be a mother, begetting people for God to a new life (cf. Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter VIII). Now, dear Brothers: how near you are to this cause of God! How deeply it is imprinted upon your vocation, ministry and mission. In consequence, in the midst of the People of God, that looks to Mary with immense love and hope, you must look to her with exceptional hope and love. Indeed, you must proclaim Christ who is her Son; and who will better communicate to you the truth about him than his Mother? You must nourish human hearts with Christ: and who can make you more aware of what you are doing than she who nourished him? "Hail, true Body, born of the Virgin Mary". In our "ministerial" priesthood there is *the wonderful and penetrating dimension of nearness to the Mother of Christ*. So let us try to live in that dimension. If I may be permitted to speak here of my own experience, I will say to you that in writing to you I am referring especially to my own personal experience.

As I communicate all this to you, at the beginning of my service to the universal Church, I do not cease to ask God to fill you, Priests of Jesus Christ, with every blessing and grace, and as a token of this communion in prayer I bless you with all my heart, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Accept this blessing. Accept the words of the new Successor of Peter, that Peter whom the Lord commanded: "And once you have recovered, you in your turn must strengthen your brothers" (Lk 22:32). Do not cease to pray for me together with the whole Church, so that I may respond to that exigency of a primacy of love that the Lord made the foundation of the mission of Peter, when he said to him: "Feed my lambs" (Jn 21:16). Amen.

*From the Vatican, 8 April, Passion Sunday (Palm Sunday), in the year 1979, the first of the Pontificate.*

IOANNES PAULUS PP. II

© Copyright 1979 Libreria Editrice Vaticana

---

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana