



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE CLERGY OF ROME

Thursday, 14 February 2002

*Your Eminence,
Brothers in the Priesthood,
Dear Roman Priests,*

1. For me, this meeting with the Roman clergy that is held every year at the beginning of Lent is a heartfelt joy. I greet each one of you with affection and thank you for being here and for your service to the Church of Rome. I greet and thank the Cardinal Vicar, the Vicegerent, the Auxiliary Bishops and those who have addressed me.

"And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired; and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, to be with him, and to be sent out to preach" (Mk 3,3-15). At the beginning of the Lenten journey, these words of the Evangelist Mark, on which you have based your diocesan pastoral programme, remind us priests of that search for intimate closeness with the Lord, which for every Christian, but particularly for us, is the secret of our life and the source of the fruitfulness of our ministry.

These same Gospel words shed a very clear light on the deep bond that exists between *the divine vocation*, received in the obedience of faith, and *the Christian mission of witnessing to and announcing Christ, humble but courageous collaborators in his work of salvation*. So you do well to *pay special attention to vocations* and particularly to those to the priesthood and to the consecrated life, within the great *missionary orientation* that characterizes the life and pastoral work of our diocese.

2. We all know how necessary vocations are for the life, witness and pastoral action of our ecclesial communities. And we also know that the decrease in the number of vocations in a diocese or in a nation is often the result of the weakening of faith and of spiritual fervour.

Therefore, we must not be easily satisfied with the explanation that the scarcity of vocations is compensated for by *growth in the apostolic commitment of lay people*, nor even less that it is desired by Providence to foster this growth. On the contrary, the more numerous are the lay people who intend to live their own baptismal vocation generously, the more necessary are the presence and pastoral work of the ordained ministers.

This does not make us want to deny the well known difficulties that today, in Rome, as in a large part of the Western world, stand in the way of a positive response to the Lord's call. Indeed, for many reasons it has become difficult to conceive of and embark on *great and demanding lifelong* vocations that require full and definitive commitment and not partial or temporary involvement. And it is even more difficult, for many, to see plans of this kind as born in the first place from God's call, from the plan of mercy that he has conceived for each person from eternity, and not as something for which they alone are responsible, the result of their own decisions and ingenuity.

At the base of the Church's promotion of vocations, there must therefore be *a great common commitment*, which challenges the lay faithful as well as priests and religious and consists in rediscovering that basic dimension of our faith through which life itself, every human life, *is the fruit of God's call* and can only be positively fulfilled as a response to this call.

3. It is within this great reality of life as a vocation and, in concrete, of our common baptismal vocation, that the *vocation to the ordained ministry, the priestly vocation*, manifests its full, extraordinary importance. It is in fact a gift and mystery, the mystery of God's free choice: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide" (Jn 15,16).

Yes, dear Brothers in the priesthood, *our vocation is a mystery*. As I wrote on the occasion of my priestly Jubilee, it is "the mystery of a 'wondrous exchange' *admirabile commercium* between God and man. A man offers his humanity to Christ, so that Christ may use him as an instrument of salvation, making him as it were into another Christ. Unless we grasp the mystery of this 'exchange', we will not understand how it can be that a young man, hearing the words "Follow me!", can give up everything for Christ, in the certainty that if he follows this path he will find complete personal fulfilment" (*Gift and Mystery* [English edition], Pauline Publications, Africa 1996, p. 88).

Therefore, when we speak of our priesthood and give witness to it, we must do so with great joy and gratitude, and also with equally great humility, conscious that "God ... called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave us" (2 Tm 1,9).

4. It thus becomes rather clear why the first and principal activity in favour of vocations can only be prayer: "The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to

send out labourers into his harvest" (Mt 9,37-38; cf. Lk 10,2). Prayer for vocations is not and cannot be the result of resignation, as though we were to think that we have already done all we can for vocations, with very meagre results, and therefore, there is nothing else to do but pray. In fact prayer is *not a kind of delegating to the Lord* so that he can act in our place. *Instead it is confiding in him*, putting ourselves in his hands, which makes us in turn confident and ready to do God's work.

Consequently, prayer for vocations is certainly the *mission of the whole Christian community*, but it should be practised intensely, primarily by those who are of the age and condition to choose their own state of life, as are the young.

For the same reason, prayer must be guided by *pastoral care that has a clear and explicit vocational stamp*. From the moment when they begin to know God and to develop a moral conscience, our children and young people must be helped to discover that life is a vocation and that God calls some to follow him more closely, in communion with him and with the gift of themselves. With regard to vocations *Christian families* thus have an important and irreplaceable mission and responsibility and should be helped to respond to it with awareness and generosity. Likewise *catechesis* and the whole pastoral approach to Christian initiation must include a first presentation of vocation.

Of course, this suggestion should become more insistent and penetrating, but always with full respect for the conscience and freedom of the person, as adolescence gradually replaces childhood and then youth. Care and concern for vocations is one of the fundamental criteria of pastoral care for youth, schools and university. Nevertheless, in the end, all the members and groups of every parish and Christian community must feel co-responsible for the presentation and the necessary direction of the special vocations.

5. However, it is clear, dear Priests, that pastoral care vocations *primarily challenge us* and are entrusted in the first place to our prayer, to our ministry, to our personal witness. Indeed, it is difficult for a vocation to the priesthood to be born without a relationship with a priest figure, without personal contact with him, without his friendship, his patient and caring attention, and his spiritual guidance.

If children and young people see priests overwhelmed with too many things to do, quickly irritated and complaining, neglectful of prayer and the tasks proper to their ministry, how can they be fascinated by the way of the priesthood? If, on the other hand, they experience in us the joy of being ministers of Christ, generosity in the service to the Church, promptness in taking charge of the human and spiritual growth of the persons entrusted to us, they will be impelled to wonder whether this might not be, for them too, the "good portion" (Lk 10,42), the most beautiful choice for their young lives.

Dear Brother Priests, let us entrust this special concern for vocations to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ, Mother of the Church and, in particular, Mother of priests. Let us also entrust to her our Lenten journey and especially our personal sanctification: indeed the Church needs holy priests, to open to Christ even doors that seem the most closed.

The Holy Father then spoke extemporaneously:

I saw that most of the speakers had prepared a written text, so I followed them. But then I also saw that some were improvising. Perhaps I too can improvise a little.

The words stay with me: "the apple of his eye" (*pupilla oculi*). The "apple" of the bishop's eye is the seminary, because through the seminary, he sees the Church's future. I am prompted to say this by the experience I have had of being bishop for so many years, first in Krakow and then in Rome: in Krakow for 20 years, in Rome already for 24. This is very true, this is the "apple of his eye".

And I hope that all the bishops of Rome, those who will come after me, and all the bishops of the world, will maintain this principle and will look with hope at our seminaries. May vocations not be lacking! Thanks be to God there is no lack of vocations in Rome. Thanks be to God! I also remember that in my past, certain historical moments in the life of the Church in Poland gave rise to more vocations. For example, the millennium, but not only that: also the *peregrinatio* of Our Lady of Czestochowa, and other events.

So I have tried to imitate not only those who read, but also those who improvised!