



# The Holy See

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CELEBRATION OF VESPERS  
FOR THE OPENING OF THE ACADEMIC YEAR  
OF ROME'S PONTIFICAL UNIVERSITIES

***HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI***

*The Altar of the Chair in the Vatican Basilica*

*Friday, 4 November 2011*

[\[Video\]](#)

[Photo Gallery](#)

*Venerable Brothers,*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

It is a joy for me to celebrate Vespers with you, the great community of Pontifical Universities in Rome. I greet Cardinal Zenon Grocholewski, thanking him for the kind words he addressed to me and especially for his service as Prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education, assisted by the Secretary and the other members of staff. To them, and to all the rectors, professors and students, I extend my most cordial greeting.

Seventy years ago Venerable [Pius XII](#) established the Pontifical Work for Priestly Vocations with the *Motu Proprio* [Cum Nobis](#) (cf. AAS 33 [4 Nov. 1941], 479-481). Its purpose was to promote vocations to the priesthood, to spread knowledge of the dignity of and need for the ordained ministry and to encourage the faithful to pray so as to obtain many worthy priests from the Lord. For the anniversary, I would like to offer you some reflections this evening on the priestly ministry. The *Motu Proprio* [Cum Nobis](#) marked the beginning of a vast movement of prayer initiatives and pastoral activities. It was a clear and generous response to the Lord's call: "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). After the Pontifical Mission had been launched, others like it developed

everywhere. Among these I would like to mention *Serra International* founded by some entrepreneurs from the United States and named after Fr Junípero Serra, a Spanish Franciscan friar, with the aim of encouraging and supporting vocations to the priesthood and helping seminarians financially. I address a kind thought to the *Serra* members who are celebrating the 60th anniversary of their recognition by the Holy See. The Pontifical Work for Priestly Vocations was established on the liturgical feast of St Charles Borromeo, revered patron of seminarians. Let us ask him also at this celebration, to intercede for reawakening a sound formation and for an increase of vocations to the priesthood.

The Word of God, which we heard in the passage from the First Letter to Peter, also invites us to meditate on the mission of pastors in the Christian community. From the dawn of the Church, importance was clearly given to the leaders of the first communities established by the Apostles for the proclamation of the Word of God through preaching and the celebration of the sacrifice of Christ, the Eucharist. Peter avidly encourages them: “I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness to the sufferings of Christ as well as a partaker in the glory that is to be revealed” (1 Pet 5:1). St Peter made this appeal on the strength of his personal relationship with Christ, which culminated in the dramatic events of the Passion and the experience of meeting him [Christ] risen from the dead. Peter also relies on the mutual solidarity of pastors in the ministry, underlining his and their belonging to the one Apostolic order: by saying “as a fellow elder”; the Greek term for this is *sumpresbyteros*. Tending the flock of Christ is a vocation and it is a common task for them and makes them particularly united because they are united to Christ by a special bond. In fact, the Lord Jesus compared himself many times to a caring shepherd, attentive to each one of his sheep. He said: “I am the good shepherd” (Jn 10:11). St Thomas Aquinas commented: “Although the Church’s leaders, are all shepherds, nevertheless he says explicitly ‘I am the *good* shepherd’, in order to introduce the virtue of charity gently. For no one can be a good shepherd unless he has become one with Christ and his members through charity. The first duty of a good shepherd is charity”. Thus St Thomas Aquinas comments on the Gospel of St John (cf. *Expositio in evangelium Joannis*, ch. 10, Lect. 3).

The Apostle Peter’s conception of the call to the ministry of leading the community is great. It was conceived in continuity with the special election of the Twelve. The apostolic vocation lives on thanks to the personal relationship with Christ, nourished by regular prayer and enlivened by the passion to spread the message received and the same experience of faith as the Apostles. Jesus called the Twelve to be with him and to be sent out to preach his message (cf. Mk 3:14). There are certain conditions to ensure growing harmony in priestly life with Christ. I would like to emphasize three of these, which emerge from the Reading that we have just heard: *aspiration to work with Jesus* in spreading in the Kingdom of God, pastoral duty *freely given* and the attitude of *service*.

First, in the call to the priestly ministry we meet Jesus and are drawn to him, struck by his words, his actions, and his person. It is to have the grace to distinguish his voice from so many other voices and to respond like Peter: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life;

and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God” (Jn 6:68-69). It is like being touched by the radiance of Goodness and Love that shines from him, feeling enfolded and involved to the point of wishing to stay with him like the two disciples of Emmaus — “Stay with us, for it is toward evening” (Lk 24:29) and to proclaim the Gospel to the world. God the Father sent the Eternal Son into the world to bring about his plan of salvation. Jesus Christ established the Church so that it might extend in time the benefits of Redemption. The vocation of priests is rooted in the Father’s action realized in Christ, through the Holy Spirit. Therefore the Gospel minister is the one who lets himself be seized by Christ, who knows how to “stay” with him, who enters into harmony, into an intimate friendship with him, so that all is done “not by constraint but willingly” (1 Pet 5:2), according to his will of love, with great interior freedom and profound joy in the heart.

In the second place, we are called to be administrators of the Mysteries of God “not for shameful gain but eagerly”, St Peter says in the Reading of this evening’s Vespers (*ibid.*). One should never forget that one comes into the priesthood through the Sacrament of Orders and this means exactly opening oneself to the God’s action by choosing daily to give oneself up for God and for one’s brethren, according to the Gospel saying: “You received without pay, give without pay” (Mt 10:8). The Lord’s call to the ministry is not the fruit of special merit but a gift to be received and responded to by dedicating oneself not to one’s own plan but to God’s, in a generous and disinterested way, for he sends us out according to his will, even if this might not correspond to our idea of self-fulfilment. To love with him who loved us first and gave all of himself and to be open to allow oneself to become part of that act of full and total love for the Father and for every human being, fulfilled on Calvary. We must never forget — as priests — that the only legitimate ascent to the ministry of the pastor is not that of success, but of the Cross.

In this logic, being a priest means being a servant also through an exemplary life. Be “examples to the flock” is the Apostle Peter’s invitation (1 Pet 5:3). Priests are stewards of the means of salvation, of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation, not to dispense them according to their own will, but as humble servants for the good of the People of God. It is a life profoundly marked by this service: by care for the flock, by faithful celebration of the liturgy, and by ready concern for all brothers and sisters, especially for the poorest and most needy. In practising this “pastoral charity” modelled on Christ and with Christ, wherever the Lord may call you, every priest can completely fulfil himself and his vocation.

Dear brothers and sisters, I have offered some reflections on the priestly ministry. Also the consecrated and lay persons, I am thinking especially of the many religious and lay people who study at the Ecclesiastical Universities of Rome, as well as those who serve there as teachers or as personnel, can find useful elements for living out their time in the Eternal City more intensely. It is important for everyone, in fact, to learn ever better how to “remain” with the Lord daily in personal encounters to allow his love to take hold of them and to be proclaimers of the Gospel. It is important to seek to live one’s life generously, not according to one’s own plan, but to the one

God has for each of us, conforming our own will to the Lord's; it is important to be prepared, also through serious and committed study, to serve the People of God in the tasks which will be entrusted to them.

Dear friends, live sagely, in close communion with the Lord, this time of formation: it is a precious gift that God offers you, especially here in Rome where, in a completely unique way, the catholicity of the Church lives and breathes. May St Charles Borromeo obtain the grace of faith for everyone studying at the Roman Ecclesiastical Universities. May the Lord grant each of you, through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, *Sedes Sapientiae*, a productive academic year. Amen.

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