



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

HOLY MASS FOR THE AMERICAN PRIESTS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

Philadelphia

Thursday, 4 October 1979

Dear Brother Priests,

1. As we celebrate this Mass, which brings together the presidents or chairmen of the Priests' Senates, or Councils, of all the dioceses of the United States, the theme that suggests itself to our reflection is a vital one : the priesthood itself and its central importance to the task of the Church. In the Encyclical Letter *Redemptor Hominis*, I described this task in these words : "The Church's fundamental function in every age and particularly in ours is to direct man's gaze, to point the awareness and experience of the whole of humanity towards the mystery of God, to help men to be familiar with the profundity of the Redemption taking place in Christ Jesus" (*Redemptor Hominis*, 10).

Priests' Senates are a new structure in the Church, called for by the Second Vatican Council and recent Church legislation. This new structure gives a concrete expression to the unity of Bishop and priests in the service of shepherding the flock of Christ, and it assists the Bishop in his distinctive role of governing the diocese, by guaranteeing for him the counsel of representative advisors from among the presbyterium. Our concelebration of today's Eucharist is intended to be a mark of affirmation for the good that has been achieved by your Priests' Senates during these past years, as well as an encouragement to pursue with enthusiasm and determination this important aim, which is "to bring the life and activity of the People of God into greater conformity with the Gospel" (cf. *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, 16 :1). Most of all, however, I want this Mass to be the special occasion on which I can speak through you to all my brother priests throughout this nation about

our priesthood. With great love I repeat the words that I wrote to you on Holy Thursday : "For you I am a Bishop, with you I am a priest".

Our priestly vocation is given by the Lord Jesus himself. *It is a call which is personal and individual*: we are called by name as was Jeremiah. It is a call to service: we are sent out to preach the Good News, to "give God's flock a shepherd's care". It is a call to communion of purpose and of action: to be one priesthood with Jesus and with one another, just as Jesus and his Father are one—a unity so beautifully symbolized in this concelebrated Mass.

Priesthood is not merely a task which has been assigned; it is a vocation, a call to be heard again and again. To hear this call and to respond generously to what this call entails is a task for each priest, but it is also a responsibility for the Senates of Priests. This responsibility means *deepening our understanding of the priesthood as Christ instituted it, as he wanted it to be and to remain, and as the Church faithfully explains it and transmits it*. Fidelity to the call to the priesthood means building up this priesthood with God's people by a life of service *according to apostolic priorities*: concentration "on prayer and the ministry of the word" (Acts 6 :4).

In the Gospel of Saint Mark the priestly call of the Twelve Apostles is like a bud whose flowering displays a whole theology of priesthood. In the midst of Jesus' ministry, we read that "he went up the mountain and summoned the men he himself had decided on, who came and joined him. He named twelve as his companions whom he would send to preach the good news..." The passage then lists the names of the Twelve (Mk 3 :13-14) . Here we see three significant aspects of the call given by Jesus: he called his first priests individually and by *name*; he called them for the service of his word, *to preach the Gospel*; and he made them his own *companions*, drawing them into that unity of life and action which he shares with his Father in the very life of the Trinity.

2. Let us explore these three dimensions of our priesthood by reflecting on today's Scripture readings. For it is in the tradition of the prophetic call that the Gospel places the priestly vocation of the Twelve Apostles by Jesus. When the priest reflects on Jeremiah's call to be prophet, he is both reassured and disturbed. "Have no fear ... because I am with you to deliver you", says the Lord to the one whom he calls, "... for look, I place *my* words in your mouth". Who would not take heart at hearing such divine assurance? Yet when we consider why such reassurance is needed, do we not see in ourselves that same reluctance we find in Jeremiah's reply? Like him, at times, our concept of this ministry is too earth-bound; we lack confidence in him who calls us. We also become too attached to our own vision of ministry, thinking that it depends too much on our own talents and abilities, and at times forgetting that it is God who calls us, as he called Jeremiah from the womb. Nor is it our work or our ability that is primary : we are called to speak the words of God and not our own ; to minister the sacraments he has given to his Church; and to call people to a love which he has first made possible.

Hence *the surrender to God's call can be made with utmost confidence* and without reservation.

Our surrender to God's will must be total—the "yes" given once for all which has as its pattern the "yes" spoken by Jesus himself. As Saint Paul tells us : "As God keeps his word, I declare that my word to you is not 'yes' one minute and 'no' the next. Jesus Christ ... was not alternately 'yes' and 'no'; he was never anything but 'yes'" (2 Cor 1 :18-19).

This call of God is grace : it is a gift, a treasure "possessed in earthen vessels to make it clear that its surpassing power comes from God and not from us" (2 Cor 4 :7). But this gift is not primarily for the priest himself; it is rather a gift of God for the whole Church and for her mission to the world. Priesthood is an abiding sacramental sign which shows that the love of the Good Shepherd for his flock will never be absent. In my letter to you priests last Holy Thursday, I developed this aspect of the priesthood as God's gift: our priesthood, I said, "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 through 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" (Letter, 5). In this gift-giving to his people, it is the divine giver who takes the initiative ; it is he who calls the ones "he himself had decided on".

Hence when we reflect on the intimacy between the Lord and his prophet, his priest—an intimacy arising as a result of the call which he has initiated—we can better understand certain characteristics of the priesthood and realize their appropriateness for the Church's mission today as well as in times past:

a) Priesthood is forever—*tu es sacerdos in aeternum*—we do not return the gift once given. It cannot be that God who gave the impulse to say "yes" now wishes to hear "no".

b) Nor should it surprise the world that the call of God through the Church continues to offer us a celibate ministry of love and service after the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. God's call has indeed stirred us to the depths of our being. And after centuries of experience, the Church knows how deeply fitting it is that priests should give this concrete response in their lives to express the totality of the yes they have spoken to the Lord who calls them by name to his service.

c) The fact that there is a personal individual call to the priesthood given by the Lord to "the men he himself had decided on" is in accord with the prophetic tradition. It should help us too to understand that the Church's traditional decision to call men to the priesthood, and not to call women, is not a statement about human rights, nor an exclusion of women from holiness and mission in the Church. Rather this decision expresses the conviction of the Church about this particular dimension of the gift of priesthood by which God has chosen to shepherd his flock.

3. Dear brothers: "God's flock is in your midst; give it a shepherd's care". How close to the essence of our understanding of priesthood is the role of shepherd; throughout the history of salvation it is a recurring image of God's care for his people. And *only in the role of Jesus, the*

Good Shepherd, can our pastoral ministry as priests be understood. Recall how, in the call of the Twelve, Jesus summoned them to be his companions precisely in order to "send them out to preach the good news". Priesthood is mission and service; it is being "sent out" from. Jesus to "give his flock a shepherd's care". This characteristic of the priest—to apply an excellent phrase about Jesus as the "man-for-others"—shows us the true sense of what it means to "give a shepherd's care". It means pointing the awareness of humanity to the mystery of God, to the profundity of Redemption taking place in Christ Jesus. Priestly ministry is missionary in its very core: it means being sent out for others. like Christ sent from his Father, for the sake of the Gospel, sent to evangelize. In the words of Paul VI, "evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity ... and making it new" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 18). At the foundation and center of its dynamism, evangelization contains a clear proclamation that salvation is in Jesus Christ the Son of God. It is his name, his teaching, his life, his promises, his kingdom and his mystery that we proclaim to the world. And the effectiveness of our proclamation, and hence the very success of our priesthood, depends on our fidelity to the Magisterium, through which the Church guards "the rich deposit of faith with the help of the Holy Spirit who dwells within us" (2 Tim 1 :14).

As a pattern for every ministry and apostolate in the Church, priestly ministry is never to be conceived in terms of an acquisition ; in so far as it is a gift, it is a gift to be proclaimed and shared with others. Do we not see this clearly in Jesus' teaching when the mother of James and John asked that her sons sit on his right hand and his left in his kingdom? "You know how those who exercise authority among the Gentiles lord it over them; their great ones make their importance felt. It cannot be like that with you. Anyone who aspires to greatness must serve the rest, and whoever wants to rank among you must serve the needs of all. Such is the case with the Son of Man who has come, not to be served by others, but to serve, to give his own life as a ransom for the many" (Mt 20 :25-28).

Just as Jesus was most perfectly a "man-for-others" in giving himself up totally on the Cross, so the priest is most of all servant and "man-for-others" when he acts *in persona Christi* in the Eucharist, leading the Church in that celebration in which this Sacrifice of the Cross is renewed. For in the Church's daily Eucharistic worship the "Good News" that the Apostles were sent out to proclaim is preached in its fullness; the work of our Redemption is re-enacted.

How perfectly the Fathers at the Second Vatican Council captured this fundamental truth in their Decree on Priestly Life and Ministry : "The other sacraments, as every ministry of the Church and every work of the apostolate, are linked with the holy Eucharist and are directed towards it ... Hence the Eucharist shows itself to be source and the summit of all evangelization" (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 5). *In the celebration of the Eucharist, we priests are at the very heart of our ministry of service, of "giving God's flock a shepherd's care". All our pastoral endeavors are incomplete until our people are led to the full and active participation in the Eucharistic Sacrifice.*

4. Let us recall how Jesus named twelve as his companions. *The call to priestly service includes an invitation to special intimacy with Christ.* The lived experience of priests in every generation has led them to discover in their own lives and ministry the absolute centrality of their personal union with Jesus, of being his companions. No one can effectively bring the good news of Jesus to others unless he himself has first been his constant companion through personal prayer, unless he has learned from Jesus the mystery to be proclaimed.

This union with Jesus, modeled on his oneness with his Father, has a further intrinsic dimension, as his own prayer at the Last Supper reveals : "that they may be one, Father, even as we are one" (*Jn 17 :11*). His priesthood is one, and this unity must be actual and effective among his chosen companions. Hence unity among priests, lived out in fraternity and friendship, becomes a demand and an integral part of the life of a priest.

Unity among priests is not a unity or fraternity that is directed towards itself. It *is for the sake of the Gospel*, to symbolize, in the living out of the priesthood, the essential direction to which the Gospel calls all people : to the union of love with him and one another. And this union alone can guarantee peace and justice and dignity to every human being. Surely this is the underlying sense of the prayer of Jesus when he continues : "I pray also for those who believe in me through their word, that all may be one as you, Father, are in me, and I in you" (*Jn 17:20-21*). Indeed, how will the world come to believe that the Father has sent Jesus unless people can see in visible ways that those who believe in Jesus have heard his commandment to "love one another"? And how will believers receive a witness that such love is a concrete possibility unless they find it in the example of the unity of their priestly ministers, of those whom Jesus himself forms into one priesthood as his own companions?

My brother priests: have we not here touched upon the heart of the matter—our zeal for the service of the people. This concelebrated Mass, which so beautifully symbolizes the unity of our priesthood, gives to the whole world the witness of the unity for which Jesus prayed to his Father on our behalf. But it must not become a merely transient manifestation, which would render fruitless the prayer of Jesus. Every Eucharist renews this prayer for our unity: "Lord, remember your Church throughout the world; make us grow in love, together with John Paul our pope, ... our bishop, and all the clergy".

Your Priests' Senates, as new structures in the Church, provide a wonderful opportunity to give visible witness to the one priesthood you share with your Bishops and with one another, and to demonstrate what must be at the heart of the renewal of every structure in the Church: the unity for which Jesus himself prayed.

At the beginning of this homily, I charged you with the task of taking responsibility for your priesthood, a task for each one of you personally, a charge to be shared with all the priests, and especially to be a concern for your Priests' Councils. The faith of the whole Church needs to have

clearly in focus the proper understanding of the priesthood and of its place in the mission of the Church. So the Church depends on you to deepen ever more this understanding, and to put it into practice in your lives and ministry : in other words, to share the gift of your priesthood with the Church by renewing the response you have already made to Christ's invitation—"come, follow me"—by giving yourselves as totally as he did.

At times we hear the words, "Pray for priests". And today I address these words as an appeal, as a plea, to all the faithful of the Church in the United States. Pray for priests, so that each and every one of them will repeatedly say *yes* to the call he has received, remain constant in preaching the Gospel message, and be faithful forever as the companion of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear Brother Priests : as we renew the Paschal Mystery and stand as disciples at the foot of the Cross with Mary the Mother of Jesus, let us entrust ourselves to her. In her love we shall find strength for our weakness and joy for our hearts.

© Copyright 1979 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana