



The Holy See

ORDINATION OF NEW PRIESTS FOR THE DIOCESE OF ROME

HOMILY OF POPE JOHN PAUL II

Fourth Sunday of Easter, 20 April 1997

1. *"I am the good shepherd"* (Jn 10:11).

Today, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, "Good Shepherd Sunday", I have the joy of ordaining 31 new priests trained in Rome's diocesan seminaries. This is a happy custom which fits well in the liturgical and spiritual context of this day dedicated to prayer for vocations. As I give thanks to the Lord for the gift of the priesthood, dear brothers and sisters, I would like to pause and consider with you what Christ says about the good shepherd.

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (ibid.). How can we fail to see in these words an implicit reference to the mystery of the Lord's Death and Resurrection? "I lay down my life that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord, and I have power to take it again" (Jn 10:17-18). Christ freely offered himself on the Cross and rose by virtue of his own divine power. Therefore the allegory of the good shepherd has a strongly paschal character and for this reason the Church proposes it for our reflection during this Easter season.

"I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father" (Jn 10:14-15). From the mystery of God's eternal knowledge, from the intimacy of Trinitarian love spring the priesthood and the pastoral mission of Christ, who says: "I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd" (Jn 10:15-16). Christ's pastoral mission is a universal mission, which is not limited to the sons and daughters of Israel, but, by virtue of his sacrifice on the Cross, embraces all men and all peoples.

2. By attentively reading this Gospel passage, we discover that it is *an evocative summary of the theology of Christ's priesthood* and of the ministerial priesthood which you, beloved deacons, are preparing to receive. You are called, like the Good Shepherd, to give your life by leading the Christian people to salvation. You must imitate Christ, becoming his courageous witnesses and tireless ministers of his Gospel.

Dear ordinands, I greet you with affection. I greet all those who guided you on your formative journey in the various seminaries of Rome; I greet your families and the Christian communities in which your vocation developed, as well as your friends who share the joy of your priestly ordination today.

The priestly vocation is a call to the pastoral ministry, that is, to the service of Christ's flock: a service that you are about to undertake in the Diocese of Rome and in other particular Churches. The Christian community is praying for you today, so that the "great shepherd of the sheep" (Heb 13:20) may impart to you that total love which is indispensable for the pastors of the Church.

What we heard in the Gospel about Christ the Good Shepherd becomes at this moment a unanimous invocation to the heavenly Father to imbue you with Christ's love and generous dedication. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (Jn 10:11).

3. Dear deacons, you must *make these words a living experience in every task and circumstance* of your priestly life. It will be necessary *to draw from them the light and strength* that are indispensable for your priestly ministry.

May you be supported by the prayer of the Christian community, which is particularly intense in this liturgy, prayer that is joined to your trusting supplication, expressed by the moving rite of prostrating on the floor while the Litany of the Saints is being sung. The Church asks not only for the grace of the sacrament of the priesthood for you, but also for *sanctification, so that you, in turn, can sanctify others*. This is a decisive moment in your lives, which will remain imprinted on your minds and hearts for ever, as it does for every priest.

I also cherish a living and moving memory of this great prayer of supplication which precedes the culminating moment of ordination, when the Bishop lays his hands on the ordinand, pronounces the prayer of consecration and, through this ancient liturgical gesture which dates back to the Apostles, transmits to him the sacramental power of the priesthood, introducing him into the Church's "presbyterium". The hymn *Veni Creator* accompanies this solemn moment, a hymn in which we invoke the Holy Spirit, who is the Lord and Giver of life, that he may come and transfigure with his light and power all we accomplish in our human weakness.

*"Veni Creator Spiritus,
Mentes tuorum visita,*

*Imple superna gratia,
Quae tu creasti pectora”.*

*“Come , O Creator, Spirit blest,
And in our souls take up your rest;
Come with your grace and heavenly aid,
To fill the hearts which you have made”.*

4. “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” (Ps 117 [118]:26). Through the words of the responsorial psalm we have just sung, this Sunday's liturgy continues to show us the mystery of the risen Christ. It is a hymn of thanksgiving; we praise and thank God for he is good: his steadfast love endures for ever (cf. Ps 117 [118]:1). We give him thanks because he has heard our petitions and has become our salvation (cf. Ps 117 [118]:21). We exalt him above all for Christ, who in his Death and Resurrection became the cornerstone of the divine building (cf. Ps 117 [118]:22). The Church is built on him, and the royal priesthood of every baptized person and still more the ministerial priesthood of presbyters is founded on him.

The words of this psalm *bring us into the Eucharistic mystery*, which from this moment and for all the days of your lives will be *your particular portion and your spiritual gift*.

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”! All of us, Bishops and priests, when celebrating the divine sacrifice, repeat this invocation at the time of the *Sanctus* and immediately before the consecration. Thus we welcome Christ who daily becomes present on the altar, as he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, to offer the sacrifice of Redemption. When in his name, *in persona Christi Capitis*, we pronounce the words of consecration spoken by him in the Upper Room, it is always the same Christ who makes the sacrifice of the Cross present through our ministry.

Sacerdos alter Christus! Think, minister of the altar, think, priest of Christ, what a great mystery becomes your portion and inheritance! What great mercy has been lavished upon you! Ask God to be able to respond with total love to his infinite love.

May the Blessed Virgin Mary, who beneath the Cross was united to the sacrifice of her Son, and was given to us by him as our Mother, help and protect you with her intercession, so that you may be the faithful image of the Good Shepherd among your brothers and sisters.

Amen!

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