



The Holy See

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

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,

THE GREAT DAY is drawing near when we shall share in the liturgy of Holy Thursday together with our brothers in the priesthood and shall meditate together on the priceless gift in which we have become sharers by virtue of the call of Christ the eternal Priest. On that day, before we celebrate the liturgy *In Cena Domini*, we shall gather together in our cathedrals to renew before him who became for us "obedient unto death" (Phil 2:8) in total self-giving to the Church, his spouse, our giving of ourselves to the exclusive service of Christ in his Church.

On this holy day, the liturgy takes us inside the Upper Room, where, with grateful heart, we set ourselves to listen to the words of the divine Teacher, words full of solicitude for every generation of bishops called, after the apostles, to take upon themselves care for the Church, for the flock, for the vocation of the whole People of God, for the proclamation of God's Word, for the whole sacramental and moral order of Christian living, for priestly and religious vocations, for the fraternal spirit in the community. Christ says: "I will not leave you orphans; I will come back to you" (Jn 14:18). It is precisely this Sacred Triduum of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of the Lord that re-evokes in us, in a vivid way, not only the memory of his departure, but also faith in his return, in his continuous coming. Indeed, what is the meaning of the words: "I am with you always; yes, to the end of time"? (Mt 28:20).

Venerable and dear Brothers, in the spirit of this faith, which fills the entire Triduum, it is my desire that, in our vocation and our episcopal ministry, we should feel in a special way this year—the first of my pontificate—that unity which the Twelve shared in when together with our Lord they were assembled for the Last Supper. It was precisely there that they heard those words that were most complimentary and at the same time most binding: "I shall not call you servants any more, because a servant does not know his master's business; I call you friends, because I have made

known to you everything I have learned from my Father. You did not choose me, no, I chose you; and I, commissioned you to go out and to bear fruit, fruit that will last" (Jn 15:15-16).

Can anything be added to those words? Should one not rather pause in humility and, gratitude before them, given the greatness of the mystery we are about to celebrate? There then takes root even deeper within us our awareness of the gift that we have received from the Lord through our vocation and our episcopal ordination. In fact the gift of the sacramental fullness of the priesthood is greater than all the toils and also all the sufferings involved in our pastoral ministry in the Episcopate.

The Second Vatican Council reminded us and clearly showed that this ministry, while being a personal duty of each one of us, is nevertheless something that we carry out in the brotherly communion of the whole of the Church's episcopal College or "body". While it is right that we should address every human being, and especially every Christian as "brother", this word takes on an altogether special meaning with regard to us Bishops and our mutual relationships: in a certain sense it goes back directly to that brotherhood which gathered the apostles about Christ; it goes back to that friendship with which Christ honoured them and through which he united them to one another, as is attested by the words of John's Gospel quoted above.

Therefore, venerable and dear Brothers, we must express the wish, today especially, that everything that the Second Vatican Council so wonderfully renewed in our awareness should take on an ever more mature character of collegiality, both as the principle of our collaboration (*collegialitas effectiva*) and as the character of a cordial fraternal bond (*collegialitas affectiva*), in order to build up the Mystical Body of Christ and to deepen the unity of the whole People of God.

As you gather in your cathedrals, with the diocesan and religious priests who make up the *presbyterium* of your local Churches, your dioceses, you will receive from them—as is provided for—the renewal of the promises that they placed in the hands of you, the Bishops, on the day of their priestly ordination. With this in mind, I am sending to the priests another letter that—as I hope—will enable you and them to live even more deeply this unity, this mysterious bond that joins us in the one priesthood of Jesus Christ, brought to completion with the sacrifice of the Cross, which merited for him entrance "into the sanctuary" (cf. Heb 9:12). Venerable Brothers, I hope that these words of mine addressed to the priests, at the beginning of my ministry in the See of Saint Peter, will also help you to strengthen ever more that communion and unity of the whole *presbyterium* (cf. Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 28) which have their basis in our collegial communion and unity in the Church.

And may there be a renewal of your love for the priests whom the Holy Spirit has given and entrusted to you as the closest collaborators in your pastoral office. Take care of them like beloved sons, brothers and friends. Be mindful of all their needs. Have particular solicitude for their spiritual advancement, for their perseverance in the grace of the sacrament of the priesthood. Since it is

into your hands they make—and each year renew—their priestly promises, and especially the commitment to celibacy, do everything in your power to ensure that they remain faithful to these promises, as is demanded by the holy tradition of the Church, the tradition that sprang from the very spirit of the Gospel.

May this solicitude for our brothers in the priestly ministry also be extended to the seminaries, which constitute, in the Church as a whole and in each of her parts, an eloquent proof of her vitality and spiritual fruitfulness, which are expressed precisely in readiness to give oneself exclusively to the service of God and of souls. Today, every possible effort must again be made to encourage vocations, to form new generations of priests. This must be done in a genuinely evangelical spirit, and at the same time by "reading" properly the signs of the times, to which the Second Vatican Council gave such careful attention. The full reconstitution of the life of the seminaries throughout the Church will be the best proof of the achievement of the renewal to which the Council directed the Church.

Venerable and dear Brothers: everything that I am writing to you, as I prepare to live Holy Thursday intensely—the "feast" of priests—I wish to link up closely with the desire that the apostles heard expressed that day by the lips of their beloved Teacher: "go out and bear fruit, fruit that will last" (Jn 15:16). We can bear this fruit only if we remain in him: in the vine (cf. Jn 15:1-8). He told us this clearly in his words of farewell on the day before his Passover: "Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). Beloved Brothers, what more could I wish you, what more could we wish one another, than precisely this: to remain in him, Jesus Christ, and to bear fruit, fruit that will last?

Accept these good wishes. Let us strive to deepen ever more our unity; let us strive to live ever more intensely the sacred Triduum of the Passover of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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

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