



The Holy See

**LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO PRIESTS
FOR HOLY THURSDAY 1996**

Dear Brothers in the Priesthood!

The unique vocation of Christ the Priest

'Let us consider our call, brethren' (cf. 1Cor 1:26). The priesthood is a call, a particular vocation: 'one does not take this honour upon himself, but he is called by God' (Heb 5:4). The Letter to the Hebrews harks back to the priesthood of the Old Testament in order to lead us to an understanding of the mystery of Christ the Priest: 'Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him: ... You are a priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek' (5:5-6).

1. Christ, the Son of one being with the Father, has been made priest of the New Covenant according to the order of Melchizedek: therefore he too was called to the priesthood. It is the Father who 'calls' his own Son, whom he has begotten by an act of eternal love, to 'come into the world' (cf. Heb 10:5) and to become man. He wills that his only-begotten Son, by taking flesh, should become 'a priest for ever': the one priest of the new eternal Covenant. The Son's vocation to the priesthood expresses the depth of the Trinitarian mystery. For only the Son, the Word of the Father, in whom and through whom all things were created, can unceasingly offer creation in sacrifice to the Father, confirming that everything created has come forth from the Father and must become an offering of praise to the Creator. Thus the mystery of the priesthood has its beginning in the Trinity and is, at the same time, a consequence of the Incarnation. By becoming man, the only-begotten and eternal Son of the Father is born of woman, enters into the created order and thus becomes a priest, the one eternal priest.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews emphasizes that Christ's priesthood is linked to the sacrifice of the Cross: 'Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, then through

the greater and more perfect tabernacle (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking ... his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption' (Heb 9:11-12). The priesthood of Christ is rooted in the work of redemption. Christ is the priest of his own sacrifice: 'Through the eternal spirit he offered himself without blemish to God' (Heb9:14). The priesthood of the New Covenant, to which we are called in the Church, is thus a share in this unique priesthood of Christ.

Common priesthood and ministerial priesthood

2. The Second Vatican Council presents the idea of 'vocation' in its broadest sense. It speaks of the vocation of mankind, the Christian vocation and the vocation to marriage and family life. In this context, the priesthood is one of many vocations, one of many possible ways of following Christ, who in the Gospel frequently utters the invitation: 'Follow me'.

In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, the Council teaches that all the baptized share in the priesthood of Christ. But at the same time it clearly distinguishes between the priesthood of the People of God, common to all the faithful, and the hierarchical or ministerial priesthood. In this regard, it is worth-while quoting in full an instructive passage of the Constitution: 'Christ the Lord, High Priest taken from among men (cf. Heb 5:1-5), `made a kingdom and priests to God his Father' (Rev 1:6; cf. 5:9-10) out of this new people. The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated into a spiritual house and a holy priesthood. Thus through all those works befitting Christian men and women they can offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the power of him who has called them out of darkness into his marvellous light (cf. 1 Pet 2:4-10). Therefore all the disciples of Christ, persevering in prayer and praising God (cf. Acts 2:42-47), should present themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God (cf. Rom 12:1). Everywhere on earth they must bear witness to Christ and give an answer to those who seek an account of that hope of eternal life which is in them (cf. 1 Pet 3:15). Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated. Each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ. The ministerial priest, by the sacred power he enjoys, moulds and rules the priestly people. Acting in the person of Christ, he brings about the Eucharistic Sacrifice, and offers it to God in the name of all the people. For their part, the faithful join in the offering of the Eucharist by virtue of their royal priesthood. They likewise exercise that priesthood by receiving the sacraments, by prayer and thanksgiving, by the witness of a holy life, and by self-denial and active charity'.

The ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood of the faithful. For when the priest celebrates the Eucharist and administers the sacraments, he leads the faithful to an awareness of their own particular sharing in the priesthood of Christ.

The personal call to the priesthood

3. It is thus clear that, within the broader context of the Christian vocation, the priestly vocation is a specific call. And this tends to be borne out in our personal experience as priests: we received Baptism and Confirmation; we took part in catechesis, in celebrations of the Liturgy and above all in the Eucharist. Our vocation to the priesthood first appeared in the context of the Christian life.

Nonetheless, every vocation to the priesthood has an individual history of its own, related to quite specific moments in the life of each one of us. When Christ called his Apostles, he said to each one of them: 'Follow me!' (Mt 4:19; 9:9; Mk 1:17; 2:14; Lk 5:27; Jn 1:43; 21:19). For two thousand years he has continued to address the same invitation to many men, especially young men. Sometimes he calls them in a surprising way, even though his call is never completely unexpected. Christ's call to follow him usually comes after a long preparation. Already present in the mind of the young person, even if later overshadowed by indecision or by the attraction of other possible paths, when the call makes itself felt once more it does not come as a surprise. No wonder then that this calling prevails over all others, and the young person is able to set out on the path shown him by Christ: he takes leave of his family and begins his specific preparation for the priesthood.

There is a typology of vocation, which I would now like to sketch briefly. We find a first outline of this typology in the New Testament. With the words 'follow me', Christ calls widely differing people: there are fishermen like Peter and the sons of Zebedee (cf. Mt 4:19, 22), but there is also Levi, a publican, thereafter called Matthew. In Israel, the profession of tax-collector was considered sinful and despicable. And yet Christ calls a publican to join the group of Apostles (cf. Mt 9:9). Even more astonishing was the call of Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:1-19), a known and feared persecutor of Christians, who hated the name of Jesus. Yet this very Pharisee was called on the road to Damascus: the Lord wished to make him 'a chosen instrument', destined to suffer much for his name (cf. Acts 9:15-16).

Each of us priests sees himself in the original typology of vocation found in the Gospels. At the same time, each one knows that the story of his vocation, the path by which Christ guides him throughout his life, is in some sense unique.

Dear brothers in the priesthood, we must often pause in prayer and meditate on the mystery of our vocation, our hearts filled with wonder and gratitude to God for this ineffable gift.

The priestly vocation of the Apostles

4. The image of vocation handed down to us by the Gospels is particularly linked to the figure of the fisherman. Jesus called to himself some fishermen of Galilee, among them Simon Peter, and defined the apostolic mission by speaking of their trade. After the miraculous draught of fishes, when Peter threw himself at his feet and cried out: 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, Lord', Christ replied: 'Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching men' (Lk 5:8,10).

Peter and the other Apostles lived together with Jesus and travelled with him wherever his mission took him. They heard the words he spoke, marvelled at his works and were astonished at the miracles he performed. They knew that Jesus was the Messiah, sent by God to show Israel and all humanity the way of salvation. But their faith had to pass through the mysterious saving event which he had several times foretold: 'The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day' (Mt 17:22-23). All this came about with his Death and Resurrection, in the days which the liturgy calls the Triduum Sacrum.

Precisely during that Paschal event Christ revealed to the Apostles that their vocation was to become priests like him and in him. This took place when, in the Upper Room, on the eve of his Death on the Cross, he took bread and then the cup of wine, and spoke over them the words of consecration. The bread and the wine became his Body and Blood, given up in sacrifice for all mankind. Jesus concluded by commanding the Apostles: 'Do this ... in memory of me' (1 Cor 11:25). With these words he entrusted to them his own sacrifice and, through their hands, communicated it to the Church for all time. By entrusting to the Apostles the memorial of his sacrifice, Christ made them sharers in his priesthood. For there is a close and inseparable bond between the offering and the priest: the one who offers the sacrifice of Christ must have a share in the priesthood of Christ. Consequently, the vocation to the priesthood is a vocation to offer in persona Christi his own sacrifice, by virtue of sharing in his priesthood. From the Apostles, then, we have inherited the priestly ministry.

The priest attains his fulfilment in a constantly renewed and watchful response

5. 'The Master is here and is calling you' (cf. Jn 11:28). These words can be read with reference to the priestly vocation. God's call is at the origin of the journey which every person must make in life: it is the primary and fundamental aspect of vocation, but it is not the only one. Priestly ordination is in fact the beginning of a journey which continues until death, a journey which is 'vocational' at every step. The Lord calls priests to a number of tasks and ministries deriving from this vocation. But there is a still deeper level. Over and above the tasks which are the expression of priestly ministry, there always remains the underlying reality of 'being a priest'. The situations and circumstances of life constantly call upon the priest to confirm his original choice, to respond ever anew to God's call. Our priestly life, like every authentic form of Christian existence, is a succession of responses to God who calls.

Emblematic in this regard is the parable of the servants who await their master's return. Because the master delays, they must stay awake in order to be found vigilant at his coming (cf. Lk 12:35-40). Could not this evangelical watchfulness be another way of defining the response to a vocation? For a vocation is lived out thanks to a vigilant sense of responsibility. Christ emphasizes this: 'Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes ... And if he comes in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them so, blessed are those servants!' (Lk 12:37-38).

Priests in the Latin Church take on the commitment to live in celibacy. If vocation is watchfulness, certainly a significant aspect of the latter is fidelity to this commitment throughout one's whole life. But celibacy is only one of the dimensions of a vocation - a vocation which is lived out, along the journey of life, as part of an overall commitment to the many different tasks which derive from the priesthood.

A vocation is not something static: it has an inherent dynamism. Dear Brothers in the priesthood, we confirm and constantly fulfil our vocation to the extent that we live faithfully the 'mysterium' of God's covenant with mankind, and, in particular, the 'mysterium' of the Eucharist. We fulfil it to the extent that we love ever more intensely the priesthood and the priestly ministry which we are called to carry out. We then discover that we find our fulfilment in being priests, and we thus confirm the authenticity of our vocation, in accordance with God's unique and eternal plan for each one of us. This divine plan is realized to the extent that it is acknowledged and accepted by us as the plan and programme of our lives.

Priesthood as 'officium laudis'

6. Gloria Dei vivens homo. These words of Saint Irenaeus profoundly link the glory of God and man's self-realization. 'Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory' (Ps 115:1): repeating often these words of the Psalmist, we come to understand that 'realizing' ourselves in life has a point of reference and an end which are transcendent, both of them included in the concept of the 'glory of God': we are called to make our life an officium laudis.

The priestly vocation is a special call to this 'officium laudis'. When the priest celebrates the Eucharist, when he grants God's pardon in Penance or administers the other sacraments, always he is giving praise to God. The priest must therefore love the glory of the living God and proclaim, together with the community of believers, the divine glory which shines forth in creation and in redemption. The priest is called to be united in a special way to Christ, the Eternal Word and true Man, the Redeemer of the world: in the Redemption, in fact, is manifested the fullness of the glory which humanity and the whole of creation give to the Father in Jesus Christ.

Officium laudis includes not only the words of the Psalter, liturgical hymns, the songs of God's people lifted up in the sight of the Creator in all the different languages; officium laudis is above all the unceasing discovery of what is true, good and beautiful, which the world receives as a gift from the Creator. Along with that, it is the discovery of the meaning of human existence. The mystery of the Redemption has fully accomplished and revealed this meaning, bringing human life closer to the life of God. Redemption, definitively achieved in the Paschal Mystery through the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ, reveals not only the transcendent holiness of God but also, as the Second Vatican Council teaches, reveals 'man to man himself'.

God's glory is written in the order of creation and in the order of redemption; the priest is called to

live this mystery in its fullness in order to participate in the great officium laudis which is unceasingly taking place in the universe. Only by living in depth the truth of the redemption of the world and of humanity can he come close to the sufferings and problems of individuals and families, and fearlessly face as well the reality of evil and sin, with the spiritual strength necessary to overcome them.

The priest accompanies the faithful towards the fullness of life in God

7. Gloria Dei vivens homo. The priest, whose vocation is to give glory to God, is at the same time profoundly marked by the truth contained in the second part of the phrase from Saint Irenaeus: vivens homo. Love for God's glory does not distance the priest from life and all that life entails; on the contrary, his vocation brings him to discover its full meaning.

What does vivens homo mean? It means man in the fullness of his truth: man created by God in his own image and likeness; man to whom God has entrusted the earth in order that he might have dominion over it; man marked by the rich variety of nature and grace; man freed from the slavery of sin and raised to the dignity of an adopted child of God.

This is the man and the humanity which the priest has before him when he celebrates the divine mysteries: from the newborn infant brought by its parents for Baptism, to the children and youngsters he meets for catechism or religious instruction. And then there are the young people who in that most delicate period of life choose their path, their own vocation, and set out to form new families or to consecrate themselves to the Kingdom of God by entering the Seminary or an Institute of Consecrated Life. The priest must be very close to young people. At this stage of life they often turn to him for the support of his advice, for the help of his prayer, for wise vocational guidance. In this way the priest experiences how open and dedicated to people his vocation is. In coming close to young people he is meeting future fathers and mothers of families, future professionals or, at any event, people who will be able to contribute their own abilities to the building of tomorrow's society. Each of these many different vocations is close to his priestly heart and he sees each one as a particular path along which God guides people and leads them to himself.

The priest thus becomes a sharer in many different life choices, sufferings and joys, disappointments and hopes. In every situation, his task is to show God to man as the final end of his personal existence. The priest becomes the one to whom people confide the things most dear to them and their secrets, which are sometimes very painful. He becomes the one whom the sick, the elderly and the dying wait for, aware as they are that only he, a sharer in the priesthood of Christ, can help them in the final journey which is to lead them to God. As a witness to Christ, the priest is the messenger of man's supreme vocation to eternal life in God. And while he accompanies his brothers and sisters, he prepares himself: the exercise of the ministry enables him to deepen his own vocation to give glory to God in order to have a share in eternal life. He

thus moves forward towards the day when Christ will say to him: 'Well done, good and faithful servant, ... enter into the joy of your master' (Mt 25:21).

The priestly jubilee: a time of joy and thanksgiving

8. 'Consider your call, brethren' (1 Cor 1:26). Paul's exhortation to the Christians of Corinth takes on a particular meaning for us priests. We ought to 'consider' our vocation often, and discover anew its meaning and grandeur, which always surpass us. A special occasion for this is Holy Thursday, the day commemorating the institution of the Holy Eucharist and the Sacrament of the Priesthood. Other fitting occasions are anniversaries of priestly ordination, and especially priestly jubilees.

Dear Brother Priests, as I share these reflections with you, I am thinking of my own Fiftieth Anniversary of ordination to the priesthood, which falls this year. I am thinking of my seminary classmates who, like myself, followed a path to the priesthood marked by the tragic period of the Second World War. At that time the seminaries were closed and seminarians were scattered here and there. Some of them lost their lives in the hostilities. For us, the priesthood, attained in those circumstances, took on a special value. I still cherish in my memory that great moment when, fifty years ago, the assembly invoked 'Veni, Creator Spiritus' over us young Deacons lying prostrate in the middle of the church, before we received ordination by the imposition of the Bishop's hands. We give thanks to the Holy Spirit for that outpouring of grace which has marked our lives. And we continue to implore: 'Imple superna gratia, quae tu creasti pectora'.

I wish to invite you, dear Brothers in the priesthood, to share in my Te Deum of thanksgiving for the gift of my vocation. Jubilees, as you know, are important moments in a priest's life: they represent as it were milestones along the road of our calling. In the Biblical tradition, a jubilee is a time of joy and thanksgiving. The farmer gives thanks to the Creator for the harvest; on the occasion of our jubilees, we wish to thank the Eternal Shepherd for the fruits of our priestly life, for the service we have rendered to the Church and to humanity in the different parts of the world, in the most varied conditions and in the different working situations to which Divine Providence has led us and wished us to be. We know that we are 'unworthy servants' (Lk 17:10), but we are grateful to the Lord for having wished to make us his ministers.

We are grateful also to people: most of all to those who helped us to reach the priesthood, and to those whom Divine Providence has placed on the path of our vocation. We thank them all, beginning with our parents, who in so many ways have been a gift of God for us: how many and how precious the teachings and the good examples they have given us!

As we give thanks, we also ask pardon of God, and of our brothers and sisters, for our negligence and failures, the results of human weakness. The jubilee, according to Sacred Scripture, could not be just thanksgiving for the harvest: it also involved the cancellation of debts. Let us therefore beg

our merciful God to forgive the debts which we have accumulated in the course of our lives and in the exercise of our priestly ministry.

'Consider your call, brethren', the Apostle admonishes us. Prompted by his words, we 'consider' the road which we have travelled up to this point, a road which has seen our call confirmed, deepened and consolidated. We 'consider' it in order to become more clearly aware of God's loving action in our lives. At the same time, we cannot forget our brothers in the priesthood who have not persevered on the journey undertaken. We entrust them to the Father's love and assure each one of them of our prayers.

Thus, our 'consideration' turns, almost without our realizing it, into prayer. It is in this perspective, dear Brothers in the priesthood, that I wish to invite you to join in my thanksgiving for the gift of vocation and of the priesthood.

Thank you, o God, for the gift
of the priesthood

9. 'Te Deum laudamus,
Te Dominum confitemur...'
We praise you and we thank you, o God:
all the earth adores you.
We, your ministers,
with the voices of the Prophets
and the chorus of the Apostles,
proclaim you as Father and Lord of life,
of every form of life which comes from you alone.
We recognize you, o Most Holy Trinity,
as the birthplace and beginning of our vocation;
You, the Father, from eternity have thought of us,
wanted us and loved us;
You, the Son, have chosen us and called us
to share in your unique and eternal priesthood;
You, the Holy Spirit, have filled us with your gifts
and have consecrated us with your holy anointing.
You, the Lord of time and history,
have placed us on the threshold
of the Third Christian Millennium,
in order to be witnesses to the salvation
which you have accomplished for all humanity.
We, the Church which proclaims
your glory, implore you:

let there never be lacking holy priests
to serve the Gospel;
let there solemnly resound in every Cathedral
and in every corner of the world
the hymn 'Veni, Creator Spiritus'.
Come, o Creator Spirit!
Come to raise up new generations
of young people,
ready to work in the Lord's vineyard,
to spread the Kingdom of God
to the furthest ends of the earth.
And you, Mary, Mother of Christ,
who at the foot of the Cross accepted us
as beloved sons with the Apostle John,
continue to watch over our vocation.
To you we entrust the years of ministry
which Providence will grant us yet to live.
Be near us to guide us
along the paths of the world,
to meet the men and women
whom your Son redeemed with his blood.
Help us to fulfil completely the will of Jesus,
born of you for the salvation of humanity.
O Christ, you are our hope!
'In te, Domine, speravi,
non confundar in aeternum'.

From the Vatican, on 17 March, the Fourth Sunday of Lent, in the year 1996, the eighteenth of my Pontificate.

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