



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF POPE JOHN PAUL II TO THE EUROPEAN CONGRESS ON VOCATIONS

Dear Participants in the European Congress on Vocations,

1. I am pleased to extend my greeting of good wishes to you at the beginning of your work on the demanding theme: “*New Vocations for a New Europe*”. The convention, preceded by careful preparation which involved many persons devoted to the pastoral care of vocations, is a great sign of hope for the Churches of the European continent and it providentially flows into that great river of faith experiences that remind Europe of its Christian roots and the Churches of their mission to proclaim Jesus Christ to the generations of the third millennium.

This providential initiative intends to call renewed attention to the pastoral care of vocations, recognizing that it is a vital problem for the future of the Christian faith on the continent and, consequently, for the spiritual progress of European peoples themselves. This is not a question of a partial or marginal aspect of the ecclesial experience, but rather of the lived experience of faith in Jesus Christ, the only Plan capable of fully satisfying the deepest aspirations of the human heart.

2. Life has an essentially vocational structure. In fact, the plan for it stems from the heart of the mystery of God: “He chose us in him [in Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him” (Eph 1:4).

All human existence is therefore an answer to God, who makes his love felt especially on some occasions: the call to life; the entrance into his Church's communion of grace; the invitation to bear witness in the Christian community to Christ according to a completely personal and irreplaceable plan; the definitive call to communion with him at the hour of death.

There is no doubt therefore that the ecclesial community's commitment to the pastoral care of vocations is most serious and urgent. In fact, every baptized person must be helped to discover the call that in God's plan is addressed to him and to make himself available to it. It will thus be

easier for those who receive a special vocation of service to the kingdom to recognize its value and generously accept it. In fact, it is not a question of educating people to do something, but of giving a radical direction to one's existence and of making decisive choices that guide one's future for ever.

3. In this perspective, this congress on vocations to the priesthood and the consecrated life in Europe is an act of faith in the effective and constant action of God; an act of hope in the future of the Church in Europe; a gesture of love towards the People of God on the "old continent", in need individuals who are fully devoted to the proclamation of the Gospel and to the service of their brethren. You intend to identify the appropriate strategies for assisting those whom the Lord chooses for this total commitment to discovering their calling and to giving their unconditional "yes".

Your attention is directed especially to young people, so that they will know how to accept the Master's invitation to follow him. He fixes his penetrating gaze on them, the gaze of which Mark's Gospel speaks (cf. Mk 10:21): it evokes the mystery of light and love which surrounds and accompanies every human person from the first moment of his existence.

Everyone knows the problems that make it difficult to accept Christ's invitation. Among these are: consumerism, a hedonistic vision of life, the culture of escape, exaggerated subjectivism, fear of making definitive commitments, a widespread lack of thought for the future.

Like the rich young man of whom the Gospel speaks (cf. Mk 10:22), many young people feel strong inner and outer resistance to Christ's call and quite often they withdraw in sadness, succumbing to the influences that hold them back. The sadness that came over the face of the rich young man is the recurring risk of anyone who cannot decide to say "yes" to the call; and sadness is merely the façade of that emptiness of values which is in the depths of his heart and which often leads whoever is its victim to turn to the ways of alienation, violence and nihilism.

The congress however cannot merely examine the quite obvious problems that mark the world of youth. It has the primary task of pointing out to the Christian community the resources, expectations and values present in the new generations, offering at the same time concrete suggestions for developing, on the basis of these premises, a serious plan of life inspired by the Gospel. Anyone who loves young people cannot deprive them of this new, exciting possibility of life, to which Christ calls the individual for the sake of a fuller realization of his potential, as a premise for deep and lasting joy. Every effort must therefore be made so that young people will come to put Christ at the centre of their search and docilely follow whatever his call may be.

4. Your congress can receive great light from the words of the Apostle, which describe the theological constitution of every Ecclesial Community: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of

working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one" (1 Cor 12:4). It is in this perspective that the individual Churches must undertake to support the development of the gifts and charisms that the Lord never ceases to instil in his people. New vocations can arise in the Spirit when the Christian community is active and faithful to its Lord. This fruitful vitality presupposes a strong climate of faith, pervasive, assiduous prayer, attention to the quality of spiritual life, the witness of communion and esteem for the many gifts of the Spirit, missionary zeal for serving the kingdom of God.

It should therefore be stressed that the pastoral care of vocations cannot be limited to occasional and extraordinary activities that take place within the everyday life of the Ecclesial Community. It must rather be one of the constant concerns in the pastoral ministry of the local Church. In this regard, the liturgical year itself is a continuous school of faith, which invites every baptized person to enter into the mystery of God, to let himself be formed in his image and likeness.

5. Everyone knows how urgent today is pastoral attention to the role of education. Indeed, a particular Church can look confidently to her future only if she is able to give concrete expression to this pedagogical attention, constantly providing for the care of her educators and, above all, her priests.

The congress, therefore, is an invitation to all who are called — priests and consecrated persons — to be joyful witnesses in the service of the kingdom, well aware that their life is always a significant presence among young people: it encourages or discourages, it elicits a desire for God, or it acts as an obstacle to following him. The first vocational invitation is offered by a consistent witness to the risen Christ. The congress, moreover, will want to foster the growth of an authentic educational awareness in formation personnel themselves, who are called to a serious and exciting responsibility with young people: that of accompanying them in their search, stirring them to generous vocational responses, in order to renew in this season of the Church the miracle of holiness, the true secret of the ecclesial renewal for which we long.

6. Dear brothers and sisters, the task before you is far from easy, but the constant prayer that accompanies this meeting of the Churches in Europe nourishes hope in God's promise and in the radical responses to his call: they are possible even in our time. Prayer is the secret that can guarantee the rebirth of confidence within Christian communities. Prayer is the constant support of those who are called to serve the cause of the Gospel and to promote the pastoral care of vocations in these years that are difficult but not without clear signs of a new spiritual springtime. The prophetic role of Gospel radicalism is a gift that the Lord will not fail to give his Church on the threshold of the third millennium.

May Mary, the model of every vocation and the crystal-clear example of an unconditional response to God's call, accompany you in your pastoral commitment to serving "new vocations for a new Europe".

With these sentiments I impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you all.

From the Vatican, 29 April 1997.

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