



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO A GROUP OF BISHOPS FROM THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
ON THEIR «AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM» VISIT**

Friday, 9 September 1983

Dear Brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ,

A few days ago I had the joy of being with another group of American Bishops. At that time we reflected *on the Episcopal Office*, which like the Church herself, is a *mystery* rooted in Jesus Christ and in his saving love for humanity. We reflected on the Bishop's calling to be a living sign of the Incarnate Word, a living sign of Jesus Christ. Today we may well emphasize again the Bishop's personal role in teaching, governing and sanctifying the People of God; his altogether particular responsibility for the transmission of the Gospel, and the unique task that is his as the builder of community within the Church. For the love and zeal with which you fulfill your special ministry in the Church, I thank you in the name of Christ our Lord.

1. And yet, there is another great ecclesial reality that complements our consideration of the *Episcopacy*, and it is *the unity of the priesthood of Christ*, which we share with our brother priests. It is to them that our thoughts turn today - to our esteemed and loved co-workers, who participate with us in a ministry and mission that comes from Christ, belongs to Christ and leads to Christ.

And if the Bishop's role is unique, so too is that great witness in the Church of *a united priesthood*. Unique also is that wonderful *fraternity* of the presbyterate which is gathered about the Bishop and works, with him and under his leadership, to build up the unity of the Church, but which already expresses this oneness in the powerful and dynamic unity of priestly consecration and mission. Unique too is that depth of *shared responsibility* between the Bishop and his priests. For the Bishop, the priests are brothers, sons, friends, counselors and needed helpers in the vast task of effectively proclaiming Jesus Christ and salvation in his name. Not only as individuals do priests perform these roles, but the priests' councils providentially assist the Bishop in the pastoral

government of the Diocese, and are to be promoted according to the norms of the new Code of Canon Law (Cfr. *Codex Iuris Canonici*, [cann. 495-502](#)).

2. In addressing ourselves to the reality of the priesthood, we have a special personal apostolic challenge to fulfill. We are above all called upon *to live the mystery of the priesthood* as worthy examples to our brother priests. In this regard, our celebration of the Eucharist tells our priests, as well as the whole world, so much about *our own Eucharistic faith*. Even after years of experiencing the joys attached to a vast number of apostolic activities, we can look back and say that our greatest strength and the deepest source of gladness for our hearts has been *the daily celebration of Mass*, beginning with those early days after our priestly ordination. And We have always been convinced that the Eucharist is our most outstanding contribution to the Church, our greatest priestly service to the people, the deepest meaning of that splendid vocation which we share with our brother priests.

3. Just yesterday, with my approval, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in a Letter to the Bishops of the Church, reiterated the vital role *of the priest as the minister of the Eucharist*. Only the priesthood can furnish the Eucharist to God's people. And only priests have the wonderful opportunity to serve God's people by supplying them with the bread of life. Already, on the day of its publication, this document of the Holy See received the supportive commentary of a Pastoral Letter of a brother Bishop of yours. He expressed so much of the Church's understanding of the priesthood in the following terms: "The priestly ministry requires us to do many things: to preach the Word of God, to minister the other Sacraments, to encourage, to console, to serve human need, to serve the Church in administration, which the New Testament numbers among the charisms, and to do a variety of other things in virtue of the mission we receive from the Church. This means, of course, that the Priesthood does not consist exclusively in the celebration of the Eucharist. And yet, if we reflect carefully on the Church's faith about the essential link between the Sacrament of Holy Orders and the Eucharist, it does mean that the celebration of the Eucharist is at the heart of what it means to be a priest. It means that somehow and in an ultimate way the priest finds his identity in this link between his Priesthood and the Eucharist" (Archuepiscopi John Quinn *Litt. Past.*, p. 4).

Hence as we strive to live this mystery of the priesthood, we have the task of *extolling the importance of the priesthood* to the Christian people. In explaining the relation of the Eucharist and the priesthood, we are in effect proclaiming the mystery of the Church's life.

4. Another aspect of our apostolic charge is *to confirm our brother priests in their identity as ministers of the Eucharist, and therefore ministers of the Church*. Before the people and before our priests, in moments of calm and in times of crisis, we must assert the priorities of the priesthood. Each brother priest is meant to be, with us, in the words of Saint Paul, "a servant of Christ, called to be an apostle and set apart to proclaim the gospel of God" (*Rom. 1, 1*). It is in the very act of "proclamation" that we assert our common identity and confirm our brothers. Even back to the

earliest times, the choice made by the Twelve was very clear. The apostolic priorities for the priesthood, as expressed in the Acts of the Apostles, are “to concentrate on prayer and the ministry of the word” (*Act. 6, 4*).

5. The Second Vatican Council did not fail to emphasize both elements for the priests of today. For example, it clearly states: “The ministry of priests takes its start from the Gospel message” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2). At the same time the Council points out that *the ministry of the word terminates in the Eucharist*, which is itself “the source and summit of the whole work of evangelization” (*Ibid.* 5). Yes, if we read carefully the signs of the times as they relate to the priesthood, we will discern that the Eucharist determines the meaning of the priesthood and the identity of our priests. The Council is clear and concise. Its testimony means so much to clarify the meaning of our priesthood, to shed light on post-conciliar questionings and theological reflections. Let us all listen again, together with our presbyterates. It is the Holy Spirit speaking through the Council and saying: “Priests fulfill their chief duty in the mystery of the Eucharistic Sacrifice. In it the work of our redemption continues to be carried out” (*Ibid.* 13). It is crystal clear today and for the future: *the priesthood is for ever linked to the Eucharistic Sacrifice* and to the actuation of the Redemption.

But the Eucharist is also linked to the building of community. Here too all our priests can fulfill their divine vocation and their human aspirations. Through our priests, each local community is built up in faith and charity, and in an openness to the universal Church of which it is a miniature expression.

6. In the Eucharistic Sacrifice the priest finds *the source of all his pastoral charity* (Cfr. *ibid.* 14). The spirituality of all diocesan and religious priests is linked to the Eucharist. Here they obtain the strength to make the offering of their lives together with Jesus, High Priest and Victim of salvation. Through the Eucharistic Sacrifice, *celibacy is confirmed and strengthened*. From his Cross the Lord Jesus speaks to all his priests, inviting them to be, with him, signs of contradiction before the world. Jesus’ plea has entered into the apostolic tradition: “Do not conform yourselves to this age” (*Rom. 12, 2*).

7. In every age of the Church there are many meaningful actuations of the priestly ministry. But after the Eucharist, what could be more important than *the “ministry of reconciliation”* (*2 Cor. 5, 18*) *as exercised in the sacrament of Penance*? What greater human fulfillment is there than touching human hearts through the power of the Holy Spirit and in the name of the merciful and compassionate Redeemer of the world? Like the laity, our priests must strive to serve in many relevant ways every day, but they alone can forgive sins in the name of the Lord Jesus. And connected with the forgiveness of sins is new life and hope and joy for the People of God.

With fidelity to Christ, in whose “person” he acts, the priest realizes his identity and mission also through the Liturgy of the Hours, through different forms of prayer, through the reading of the word

of God and through the oblation of his will, made in union with that of Christ. The priest's special love will always be with the sick and dying, with those in pain and sorrow, and with those in sin. For every Bishop and priest there is but one ideal - the person who says: "I am the good shepherd . . . and I lay down my life for the sheep" (*Io. 10, 14-15*).

8. In the light of this principle, so many other aspects of the priesthood are clarified: the value of celibacy is proclaimed, not so much as a practical exigency, but as an expression of a perfect offering and of a configuration to Jesus Christ. An understanding of the need for priests to perform, with full human commitment and deep compassion, *those activities which only ordained priests can do*, confirms the wisdom of the Bishops' Synod of 1971, in regard to that *general exclusion of priests from secular and political activity*. It is more than ever necessary that "as a general rule the priestly ministry shall be a full-time occupation" (Pars secunda, 2, a).

9. Dear brother Bishops, since so much of the Church's life depends on the ministry of priests, let us mobilize the People of God *to pray and work for vocations*. And let us encourage our brother priests to do everything possible to help young men respond to the call of Jesus Christ, no matter what the cost. The Lord of the harvest will not desert his Church.

10. Before concluding, let me thank you for the zeal with which you have welcomed and supported the *Seminary Visitation Program* headed by Bishop John Marshall, now being conducted in America. It is being done by my authority but in the spirit of full *collegial responsibility*. For this reason I invite you to open your seminaries willingly to this visitation, and to do everything possible for its success. What is at stake is the effective training of the present and future generations of priests, so that they may be able to transmit the message of salvation in all its purity and integrity, in accordance with Christ's command: "Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you" (*Matth. 28, 20*).

Dear brother Bishops, in building up the priesthood of Jesus Christ, one of our greatest instruments is *fraternal love* - fraternal love among ourselves and for our priests. But this love must be clearly manifested, so that our priests will know, beyond all doubt, of the esteem and solidarity that love begets in us. In the attitude of our daily pastoral contacts with them, let us repeat convincingly in word and action: For you I am a Bishop, with you I am a priest.

Praised be Jesus Christ, the one High Priest of our salvation. And may his Mother Mary be a Mother to us all!