



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE PLENARY SESSION  
OF THE CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY**

*Friday 23 November 2001*

*Your Eminences,  
Your Excellencies, Monsignors and Fathers,  
Brothers and Sisters in Christ!*

1. With great joy I welcome you, on the occasion of the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Clergy. I cordially greet Cardinal Dario Castrillón Hoyos, Prefect of the Congregation, and I thank him for his kind words addressed to me in the name of all present. I greet the Cardinals, Bishops and the participants in your Plenary Assembly, which has focused on an important topic for the life of the Church: *the Priest, Pastor and Guide of the Parish Community*. Stressing the function of the priest in the parish community, one brings to the fore the centrality of Christ who should always be prominent in the mission of the Church.

Christ is present to his Church in the most sublime way in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. In the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, the Second Vatican Council teaches that the priest *acting in persona Christi* celebrates the Sacrifice of the Mass and administers the Sacraments (cf. n. 10). As my venerable predecessor Paul VI so aptly observed in his Encyclical Letter *Mysterium fidei*, which followed the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 7, Christ is also present through preaching and the guidance of the faithful, tasks to which the priest is personally called (cf. AAS 57 [1965] 762).

2. The presence of Christ, which thus takes place in a daily and ordinary way, makes the parish an authentic community of the faithful. It is therefore of fundamental importance for the parish to have a priest as its pastor and the title of pastor is specifically reserved to the priest. The sacred Order of the presbyterate represents the indispensable and irreplaceable condition for him to be appointed pastor validly (cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 521, 1). Certainly, other faithful can actively

collaborate with him, even full-time, but because they have not received the ministerial priesthood, they cannot replace him as pastor.

What determines this singular ecclesial centrality of the priest is the fundamental relation he has with Christ, Head and Pastor, as his sacramental re-presentation. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, I noted that "the priest's relation to the Church is inscribed in the relation which the priest has to Christ, such that the 'sacramental representation' to Christ serves as the basis and inspiration for the relation of the priest to the Church" (n. 16). The ecclesial dimension belongs to the substance of the ordained priesthood. It is totally at the service of the Church, so that the ecclesial community has an absolute need for the ministerial priesthood to have Christ the Head and Shepherd present in her. If the common priesthood results from the fact that the Christian People are chosen by God as a bridge with humanity and that every believer belongs to this people, the ministerial priesthood is the fruit of an election, of a specific vocation: "he called his disciples, and chose from them twelve" (Lk 6, 13-16). Thanks to the ministerial priesthood, the faithful are made aware of their common priesthood and they live it (cf. Eph 4, 11-12); the priest reminds them that they are the People of God and makes them able to "offer spiritual sacrifices" (cf. 1 Pt. 2,5), through which Christ himself makes us an eternal gift to the Father (cf. 1 Pt. 3,18). Without the presence of Christ represented by the priest, the sacramental guide of the community, this would not be an ecclesial community in its fullness.

3. As I said before, Christ is present in the Church in an eminent way in the Eucharist, the source and summit of ecclesial life. He is really present in the celebration of the holy Sacrifice, and when the consecrated bread is kept in the tabernacle "as the spiritual heart of the religious and parish community" (Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Mysterium fidei*, AAS 57 [1965], 772).

For this reason, the Second Vatican Council recommends that "parish priests ensure that the celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice is the centre and culmination of the entire life of the Christian community" (Decr. *Christus Dominus*, n. 30). Without Eucharistic worship as its beating heart, the parish dries up. Here it is helpful to recall what I wrote in the Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini*: "Among the many activities of a parish, none is as vital or as community-forming as the Sunday celebration of the Lord's Day and his Eucharist" (n. 35). Nothing will ever be able to replace it. The Liturgy of the Word by itself, when it is really impossible to ensure the Sunday presence of a priest, is praiseworthy to keep the faith alive, but it must always keep the regular celebration of the Eucharist as the goal to be achieved.

Where a priest is lacking one must ask the Lord with faith and insistence, to raise up numerous and holy labourers for his harvest. In *Pastores dabo vobis* I repeated that "today the prayerful expectation of new vocations should become an ever more continual and widespread habit within the entire Christian community and in every one of its parts" (n. 38). The splendour of the priestly identity, the integral exercise of the pastoral ministry united to the efforts of the whole community in prayer and personal penance, are the irreplaceable elements for an urgent pastoral activity to

recruit vocations. It would be a fatal mistake to be resigned to present difficulties, and act as if we should prepare ourselves for a Church of tomorrow that some imagine as being almost without priests. In this way, the measures adopted to remedy the present scarcity, in spite of all good will, would be seriously harmful for the Ecclesial Community.

4. Moreover, the parish is a privileged place to announce the Word of God. It includes a variety of forms and each of the faithful is called to take an active part, especially with the witness of a Christian life and the explicit proclamation of the Gospel to non-believers to lead them to the faith, or to believers to instruct them, confirm them and encourage them to a more fervent life. As for the priest, he "proclaims the word in his capacity as 'minister', as sharer in the prophetic authority of Christ and the Church" (*Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 26). To fulfil this ministry faithfully, corresponding to the gift received, he "ought first of all to develop a great personal familiarity with the Word of God" (ibid.). Even though he may be surpassed in the ability to speak by non-ordained members of the faithful, this would not reduce his being the sacramental representation of Christ the Head and Shepherd, and the effectiveness of his preaching derives from his identity. The parish community needs this kind of effectiveness, especially at the most characteristic moment of the proclamation of the Word by ordained ministers: for this reason the liturgical proclamation of the Gospel and the homily that follows it are both reserved to the priest.

5. Also the function of guiding the community as shepherd, the proper function of the parish priest, stems from his unique relation to Christ the Head and Shepherd. It is a function having a sacramental character. It is not entrusted to the priest by the community, but, through the Bishop, it comes to him from the Lord. To reaffirm this clearly and exercise this function with humble authority is an indispensable service to truth and to ecclesial communion. The collaboration of others, who have not received this sacramental configuration to Christ, is hoped for and often necessary.

However, these cannot in any way substitute the task of the pastor proper to the parish priest. The extreme cases of shortage of priests, that advise a more intense and extended collaboration of the faithful not honoured with priestly ministry, in the pastoral care of a parish, do not constitute an exception to this essential criterion for the care of souls, as is indisputably established by canonical norm (cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 517, 2). In this controversial sector, the interdicasterial Exhortation *Ecclesiae de mysterio*, that I approved in a specific way, is a sure guide to follow.

In fulfilling his duty as guide, which is his personal responsibility, the pastor will surely obtain help from the consultative bodies foreseen by canon law (cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 536-537); but these must remain faithful to their reality as consultative bodies. Therefore it will be necessary to guard oneself from any form that tends *de facto* to weaken the leadership of the parish priest, because the very structure of the parish community would be distorted.

6. I now turn my affectionate and grateful thoughts to pastors throughout the world, especially to those who work in the outposts of evangelization. I encourage them to continue in the mission of evangelization that is strenuous but precious for the whole Church. I recommend to each one to turn, in the daily exercise of pastoral care, to the maternal help of the Blessed Virgin Mary, seeking to live in profound communion with Her. In the ministerial priesthood, as I wrote in the *Letter to Priests, on the occasion of Holy Thursday 1979*, "there is the wonderful and penetrating dimension of nearness to the Mother of Christ" (n. 11). When we celebrate Holy Mass, dear Brother priests, the Mother of the Redeemer is beside us. She introduces us into the mystery of the redemptive offering of her divine Son. "*Ad Jesum per Mariam*": may this be our daily programme of spiritual and pastoral life!

With these sentiments, while I assure you of my remembrance in prayer, I impart to each one a special Apostolic Blessing, which I gladly extend to all the priests of the world.