



The Holy See

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II

JUBILEE FOR PRIESTS AND
80TH BIRTHDAY OF THE HOLY FATHER

Thursday, 18 May 2000

1. *"Ecce Sacerdos magnus, qui in diebus suis placuit Deo".*

The great Priest, indeed the High Priest, is Jesus Christ. He - as the Letter to the Hebrews affirms - entered the sanctuary with his own blood once and for all, achieving for us eternal redemption (cf. *Heb 9: 12*). Christ, Priest and Victim: he "is the same yesterday and today and for ever!" (*Heb 13: 8*). We who, as priests, have been called to share in his priesthood in a specific way are gathered together this morning to reflect on it.

The ministerial priesthood! Today's liturgy speaks of it to us, taking us back in spirit to the Upper Room, to the Last Supper, when Christ washed the Apostles' feet. The Evangelist John bears witness to it. So does Luke, but, in the passage just proclaimed, he offers us the correct interpretation of this symbolic gesture of Christ, who says of himself: "I am among you as one who serves" (*Lk 22: 27*). The Teacher leaves to his friends the commandment to love one another as he has loved them, by serving one another (cf. *Jn 13: 14*): "I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (*Jn 13: 15*).

2. *The ministerial priesthood!* It refers us above all to the Eucharist, in which Christ instituted the new rite of the Christian Passover, at the same time establishing the priestly ministry in the Church.

At the Last Supper Christ took bread into his hands, broke it and gave it to the Apostles, saying: "This is my body which will be given up for you" (*Rite of Mass*, cf. *Lk 22: 19*). Then he took the cup filled with wine and gave it to the Apostles, saying: "This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven.

Do this in memory of me" (*Rite of Mass*).

As often as you repeat this rite, the Apostle Paul explains, "you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 *Cor* 11: 26).

Beloved priests, in this way Christ places in our hands, under the appearances of bread and wine, the living memorial of the Sacrifice he offered to the Father on the Cross. He has entrusted it to his Church, to celebrate it until the end of the world. In the Church, as we know, it is he himself as the Eternal High Priest of the New Covenant who down the centuries acts through us, through his ordained ministers.

"*Do this in memory of me*": every time you do this, you will proclaim my death until my final coming.

3. The *ministerial priesthood*! We all share in it, and today we want to offer God a unanimous thanksgiving for this extraordinary gift. A gift for all times and for people of every race and culture. A gift that is renewed in the Church, through God's unchanging mercy and the generous, faithful response of so many frail men. A gift that never ceases to amaze those who receive it.

After more than 50 years of priestly life, I feel an intense need to praise and thank God for his immense goodness. My thoughts return at this moment to the Upper Room in Jerusalem where, during my recent pilgrimage to the Holy Land, I was able to celebrate Holy Mass. In that place my priesthood and yours arose from the mind and heart of Christ. This is precisely why I wanted to address my *Letter to Priests* for Holy Thursday from that "room on the upper floor", a Letter which I again offer to you today.

In the Upper Room, on the eve of his Passion, Jesus wanted to give us a share in the vocation and mission entrusted to him by the heavenly Father, that is, to bring people into his universal mystery of salvation.

4. I embrace you with deep affection, dear priests of the whole world! It is an embrace that knows no bounds and extends to the priests of every particular Church, reaching you especially, dear sick priests, who are alone or troubled by various difficulties.

I am also thinking of the priests who for different reasons no longer exercise their sacred ministry, but continue to bear in them that special configuration to Christ inherent in the indelible character of Holy Orders. I pray for them often and invite everyone to remember them in prayer, so that, through the properly obtained dispensation, they may continue to fulfil the commitment to Christian integrity and ecclesial communion.

5. Dear priests of every country and every culture, this is a day wholly dedicated to our priesthood,

to the ministerial priesthood.

With great affection I greet and thank Cardinal Darío Castrillón Hoyos, Prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy, who at the beginning of the celebration addressed cordial best wishes to me, in your name as well, on this day which is very significant for me. I greet the Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops present. I greet all of you, dear brothers in the priesthood, who have wished to be here with me today, even by coming from afar at the cost of considerable sacrifice. I hold you all close to my heart.

We have been consecrated in the Church for this specific ministry. We are called in various ways, to contribute, wherever Providence puts us, to the *formation of the community* of God's People. *Our task* - the Apostle Peter reminded us - is to tend the flock God entrusted to us, not by constraint but willingly, not as domineering over those in our charge, but by setting them an example (cf. 1 Pt 5: 2-3); a witness that, if necessary, can reach the point of shedding one's blood, as many of our confrères did in the century which has just ended.

This is our way of holiness, which leads us to our ultimate meeting with the "supreme shepherd" in whose hands is the "crown of glory" (1 Pt 5: 4). This is our mission at the service of the Christian people. May Mary, Mother of our priesthood, help us. May we be helped by the many holy priests who have gone before us in this sublime mission that is laden with responsibility.

Pray for us too, dear Christian people who have gathered round us today in faith and joy. You are a royal people, a priestly race, a holy assembly. You are the People of God who, in every part of the earth, share in Christ's priesthood. Accept the gift which we renew today in the service of this your special dignity. O priestly people, thank God with us for our ministry and sing with us to your Lord and ours: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ, for the gift of the priesthood! Grant that the Church of the new millennium may count on the generous work of many holy priests!
Amen.

At the end of Mass the Holy Father greeted the priests in various languages. To the English-speaking he said:

I greet the English-speaking priests taking part in today's Jubilee celebration, especially those marking their silver or golden anniversaries of priestly ordination and those who, like me, are celebrating their 80th birthday. Let us pray for one another that our lives will be ever more fully conformed to Jesus Christ, the Eternal High Priest, and marked by that pastoral charity which has its source in his Sacred Heart.

At the end of this beautiful priestly celebration, I cordially thank all those who have taken part, especially the dear Cardinals, Patriarchs, Archbishops and Bishops from all over the world, the

Roman Curia, the Vicariate of Rome and all the Italian-speaking priests.

I thank you all for your solidarity and your attachment to the See of Peter and to his Successor. Please bring to your communities my greetings and gratitude for their prayers. The communion and unity among us is a great force for the new evangelization.

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