



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

LETTER

TO PRIESTS

FOR HOLY THURSDAY 1995

1. *"Honour to Mary, honour and glory, honour to the Blessed Virgin! (...)
He who created the marvellous world honoured in her his own Mother (...).
He loved her as his Mother, he lived in obedience.
Though he was God, he respected her every word".*

Dear Brother Priests!

Do not be surprised if I begin this Letter, which I traditionally address to you on Holy Thursday, with the words of a Polish Marian hymn. I do so because this year I wish to speak to you *about the importance of women in the life of the priest*, and these verses which I have sung since my childhood can serve as a meaningful introduction to this subject.

The hymn speaks of Christ's love for his Mother. The first and most basic relationship which any human being establishes with a woman is precisely the relationship of the child to its mother. Each of us can express his love for his earthly mother just as the Son of God did and still does for his. Our mother is *the woman to whom we owe our life*. She conceived us in her womb and brought us into the world amid the pains which are part of the experience of every woman who gives birth. Through childbirth a special and almost *sacred* bond is established between a human being and his mother.

Having brought us into the world, our parents then enabled us to become in Christ, through the *Sacrament of Baptism*, adopted children of God. All this further deepened the bond between us and our parents, and in particular between us and our mothers. *The prototype here is Christ himself, Christ the Priest*, who addresses his Eternal Father in these words: "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me. In burnt offerings and sin

offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'Lo, I have come to do your will, O God'" (Heb 10:5-7). *These words in some way also involve his Mother*, since the Eternal Father formed Christ's body by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, thanks also to her consent: "Let it be to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38).

How many of us also owe to our mothers our very vocation to the priesthood! Experience shows that very often it is the mother who for years nurtures in her own heart a desire for a priestly vocation for her son, and *obtains it by praying with persevering trust and deep humility*. Thus, without imposing her own will, she favours with the effectiveness typical of faith the blossoming of an aspiration to the priesthood in the soul of her son, an aspiration which will bear fruit in due season.

2. In this Letter I wish to reflect on the relationship between priests and women, taking as my point of departure the fact that *the subject of women calls for special attention this year*, just as last year the subject of the family did. In fact the important *International Conference called by the United Nations Organization in Beijing* next September will be devoted to women. This is a new subject with respect to last year's, but closely related to it.

Dear Brothers in the priesthood, with this Letter I also wish to make reference to another document. Just as in the Holy Thursday Message of last year I referred to my *Letter to Families*, so this time *I would like to redirect your attention to the Apostolic Letter Mulieris dignitatem*, issued on 15 August 1988. As you will recall, this text was prepared at the end of the Marian Year of 1987-1988, during which I published the Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* (25 March 1987). It is my fervent hope that during this year you will reread *Mulieris dignitatem*, making it the subject of special meditation and giving particular consideration to its Marian aspects.

A link with the Mother of God is fundamental for Christian "thinking". This is true first of all on the theological level, because of the very special relationship of Mary with the Incarnate Word and the Church, his Mystical Body. But it is also true on the historical, anthropological and cultural levels. In Christianity, in fact, the figure of the Mother of God represents a great source of inspiration not only for the life of piety but also for Christian culture and even for love of country. Proofs of this exist in the history of many nations. In Poland for example the most ancient literary monument is the hymn *Bogurodzica* (Mother of God), which inspired our forefathers not only in shaping the life of the nation but even in defending the just cause on the battlefield. The Mother of the Son of God has become the "great inspiration" for individuals and for whole Christian nations. This too, in its own way, *tells us much about the importance of women in human life*, and, in a special way, *in the life of the priest*.

I have already had occasion to deal with this subject in the Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* and in the Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem*, where I paid homage to those women - mothers, wives, daughters or sisters - who for their respective sons, husbands, parents and brothers were an

effective inspiration for good. Not without reason do we speak of the "feminine genius", and what I have written thus far confirms the validity of this expression. However, in dealing with priestly life, the presence of women has a particular character and calls for a specific analysis.

3. But meanwhile let us return to Holy Thursday, the day when the words of the liturgical hymn take on special meaning:

Ave verum Corpus natum de Maria Virgine: Vere passum, immolatum in cruce pro homine.

Cuius latus perforatum fluxit aqua et sanguine: Esto nobis praegustatum mortis in examine.

O Iesu dulcis! O Iesu pie! O Iesu, fili Mariae!

These words, although they do not belong to the Liturgy of Holy Thursday, are closely connected with it.

The Last Supper, at which Christ instituted the sacraments of the Sacrifice and the Priesthood of the New Covenant, is the beginning of the *Triduum Paschale*. At its centre is the *Body of Christ*. It is precisely this Body which, before being subjected to suffering and death, is offered at the Last Supper as food in the institution of the Eucharist. Christ takes bread in his hands, breaks it and gives it to his Apostles with the words: "Take; eat: this is my Body" (Mt 26:26). In this way he institutes the sacrament of his *Body, that Body which, as the Son of God, he had taken from his Mother, the Immaculate Virgin*. Then, taking the cup, he offers to the Apostles his own Blood under the species of wine, saying: "Drink of it, all of you; for this is my Blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:27-28). *Here too it is the Blood which gave life to the Body received from the Virgin Mother: Blood which had to be shed, in fulfilment of the mystery of the Redemption, in order that the Body received from his Mother could - as Corpus immolatum in cruce pro homine - become for us and for all mankind the sacrament of eternal life, the viaticum for eternity. Thus in the Ave verum, which is at once a Eucharistic hymn and a Marian hymn, we ask: Esto nobis praegustatum mortis in examine.*

Even though the Holy Thursday liturgy does not speak of Mary - rather we find her on Good Friday at the foot of the Cross with the Apostle John - *it is difficult not to sense her presence at the institution of the Eucharist, the anticipation of the Passion and Death of the Body of Christ, that Body which the Son of God had received from the Virgin Mother at the moment of the Annunciation.*

For us, as priests, the Last Supper is an especially holy moment. Christ, who says to the Apostles: "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11:24), institutes the Sacrament of Holy Orders. With respect to our lives as priests, this is an eminently Christocentric moment: for we receive the priesthood from Christ the Priest, the one Priest of the New Covenant. But as we think of the

sacrifice of the Body and Blood, which we offer *in persona Christi*, we find it difficult not to recognize therein the presence of the Mother. Mary gave life to the Son of God so that he might offer himself, even as our mothers gave us life, that we too, through the priestly ministry, might offer ourselves in sacrifice together with him. Behind this mission there is the vocation received from God, but there is also hidden the great love of our mothers, just as behind the sacrifice of Christ in the Upper Room there was hidden the ineffable love of his Mother. *O how truly and yet how discreetly is motherhood and thus womanhood present in the Sacrament of Holy Orders* which we celebrate anew each year on Holy Thursday!

4. Christ Jesus is the *only son of Mary Most Holy*. We clearly understand the meaning of this mystery; it was fitting that he should be such: a Son so unique by reason of his divinity had to be the *only* son of his Virgin Mother. But precisely *this uniqueness serves in some way as the best "guarantee" of a spiritual "multiplicity"*. Christ, true man and yet Eternal and Only-Begotten Son of the Heavenly Father, *has, on the spiritual plane, a countless number of brothers and sisters*. For the family of God includes everyone: not just those who through Baptism become God's adopted children, but in a certain sense all mankind, since Christ has redeemed all men and all women and offered them the possibility of becoming adopted sons and daughters of the Eternal Father. Thus we have all become brothers and sisters in Christ.

At this point in our reflection on the relationship between priests and women, beside the figure of the mother there emerges the figure of the *sister*. Thanks to the Redemption, the priest shares in a special way in the *relationship of brotherhood* offered by Christ to all the redeemed.

Many of us priests have sisters in our families. In any event, every priest from childhood onwards has met girls, if not in his own family at least in the neighbourhood, in childhood games or at school. A type of mixed community has *enormous importance for the formation of the personalities of boys and girls*.

Here we encounter the original plan of the Creator, who in the beginning created man "male and female" (cf. Gen 1:27). This divine creative act continues from generation to generation. The Book of Genesis speaks of it in the context of the vocation to marriage: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife" (Gen 2:24). The vocation to marriage obviously assumes and requires that the environment in which one lives is made up of both men and women.

In this setting however there arise not only vocations to marriage but also *vocations to the priesthood and the consecrated life*. These do not develop in isolation. Every candidate for the priesthood, when he crosses the threshold of the seminary, has behind him the experience of his own family and of school, where he was able to meet many young people of his own age, of both sexes. In order to live as a celibate in a mature and untroubled way it seems particularly important that the priest should develop deep within himself *the image of women as sisters*. In Christ, men

and women are brothers and sisters, independently of any bonds of family relationship. This is a universal bond, thanks to which the priest can be open to every new situation, even the most foreign from an ethnic or cultural standpoint, knowing that he must exercise towards the men and women to whom he is sent a ministry of authentic *spiritual fatherhood*, which gains him "sons" and "daughters" in the Lord (cf. 1 Thes 2:11; Gal 4:19).

5. Certainly "woman as sister" represents a *specific manifestation of the spiritual beauty of women*; but it is at the same time a revelation that they are in a certain sense "set apart". If the priest, with the help of divine grace and under the special protection of Mary, Virgin and Mother, gradually develops such an attitude towards women, he will see his ministry met by *a sense of great trust* precisely on the part of women whom he regards, in the variety of their ages and life situations, as sisters and mothers.

The figure of woman as sister has considerable importance in our Christian civilization, in which countless women have become *sisters to everyone*, thanks to their exemplary attitude towards their neighbour, especially to those most in need. A *"sister" is a guarantee of selflessness*: in the school, in the hospital, in prison and in other areas of social service. When a woman remains single, in her "gift of self as sister" by means of apostolic commitment or generous dedication to neighbour, she develops a particular *spiritual motherhood*. This selfless gift of femininity "as sister" lights up human existence, evokes the best sentiments of which human beings are capable and always leaves behind gratitude for the good freely offered.

Thus the dimensions of mother and sister *are the two fundamental dimensions* of the relationship between women and priests. If this relationship develops in a serene and mature way, women will find no particular difficulties in their contact with priests. For example they will not find difficulties in confessing their faults in the Sacrament of Penance. Even less will they encounter any in undertaking various kinds of *apostolic activities* with priests. Every priest thus has the great *responsibility of developing an authentic way of relating to women as a brother*, a way of relating which does not admit of ambiguity. In this perspective, Saint Paul exhorts his disciple Timothy to treat "older women like mothers, younger women like sisters, in all purity" (1 Tm 5:2).

When Christ stated - as the Evangelist Matthew writes - that man can *remain celibate for the Kingdom of God*, the Apostles were disturbed (cf. 19:10-12). A little earlier Jesus had declared that marriage is indissoluble, and this truth had caused in them a significant reaction: "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry" (Mt 19:10). As is evident, their reaction went contrary to the notion of fidelity which Jesus had in mind. But the Master makes use even of this lack of understanding, in order to introduce into their narrow and limited way of thinking the perspective of celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven. He thereby wishes to affirm that marriage has a specific dignity and sacramental holiness, and that nevertheless there exists another path for the Christian: a path which is not a flight from marriage but rather a *conscious choice of celibacy* for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven.

*In view of this, women can only be sisters for the priest, and their dignity as sisters needs to be consciously fostered by him. The Apostle Paul, who lived a celibate life, writes in the First Letter to the Corinthians: "I wish that all were as I myself am. But each one has his own special gift from God, one of one kind and one of another" (7:7). For him there is no doubt: marriage and celibacy are both gifts of God, to be protected and fostered with great care. While emphasizing the superiority of virginity, he does not in any way diminish the value of marriage. Each has its own specific *charism*; each of them is a *vocation* which individuals, with the help of God's grace, must learn to discern in their own lives.*

The vocation to celibacy needs to be consciously protected by keeping special watch over one's feelings and over one's whole conduct. In particular, it must be protected by those priests who, following the discipline in force in the Western Church and so highly esteemed by the Eastern Church, have chosen celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of God. If in a relationship with a woman the gift and the choice of celibacy should become endangered, the priest cannot but strive earnestly to remain faithful to his own vocation. Such a defence would not mean that marriage in itself is something bad, but that for him the path is a different one. For him to abandon that path would be to break the word he has given to God.

The Lord's prayer: "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil", takes on a specific meaning in the context of *contemporary civilization*, steeped as it is in elements of hedonism, self-centredness and sensuality. Pornography is unfortunately rampant, debasing the dignity of women and treating them exclusively as objects of sexual pleasure. *These aspects of present-day civilization certainly do not favour either marital fidelity or celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of God.* Therefore if the priest does not foster in himself genuine dispositions of faith, hope and love of God, he can easily yield to the allurements coming to him from the world. On this Holy Thursday then, dear Brother Priests, how can I fail to address you in order to *exhort you to remain faithful to the gift of celibacy* which Christ has given us? In it is contained a spiritual treasure which belongs to each of us and to the whole Church.

Today our thoughts and prayers turn in a special way to *our brothers in the priesthood who meet with difficulties in this area*, and to all those who precisely because of a woman *have abandoned the priestly ministry*. Let us commend to Mary Most Holy, Mother of Priests, and to the intercession of the countless holy priests in the Church's history the difficult time which they are experiencing, and let us implore for them *the grace of a return to their first fervour* (cf. Rev 2:4-5). The experience of my own ministry, and I believe that this is true of every Bishop, confirms that such returns do occur and that even today they are not rare. God remains faithful to his covenant with man in the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

6. At this point I would like to touch on the even wider issue of the role which women are called to play *in the building up of the Church*. The Second Vatican Council fully grasped the logic of the Gospel, in Chapters Two and Three of the Constitution *Lumen gentium*, when it presented the

Church first as the People of God and only afterwards as a hierarchical structure. The Church is first and foremost the People of God, since all her members, men and women alike, *share* - each in his or her specific way - *in the prophetic, priestly and royal mission of Christ*. While I invite you to reread those texts of the Council, I will limit myself here to some brief reflections drawn from the Gospel.

Just before his Ascension into heaven, Christ commands the Apostles: "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation" (Mk 16:15). To preach the Gospel is to carry out the prophetic mission which has different forms in the Church, according to the charism granted to each individual (cf. Eph 4:11-13). In that circumstance, since it was a question of the Apostles and their own particular mission, this task was entrusted to certain men; but if we read the Gospel accounts carefully, especially that of John, we cannot but be struck by the fact that *the prophetic mission*, considered in all its breadth and diversification, *is given to both men and women*. Suffice it to mention, for example, *the Samaritan woman* and her dialogue with Christ at Jacob's Well in Sychar (cf. Jn 4:1-42): it is to her, a Samaritan woman and a sinner, that Jesus reveals the depths of the true worship of God, who is concerned not about the place but rather about the attitude of worship "in spirit and truth".

And what shall we say *of the sisters of Lazarus, Mary and Martha*? The Synoptics, speaking of the "contemplative" Mary, note the pre-eminence which Christ gives to contemplation over activity (cf. Lk 10:42). Still more important is what Saint John writes in the context of the raising of their brother Lazarus. In this case it is to Martha, the more "active" of the two, that Jesus reveals the profound mysteries of his mission: "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die" (Jn 11:25-26). The Paschal Mystery is summed up in these words addressed to a woman.

But let us proceed in the Gospel account and enter into the Passion narrative. Is it not an incontestable fact that women were the ones closest to Christ along the way of the cross and at the hour of his death? A man, Simon of Cyrene, is forced to carry the cross (cf. Mt 27:32); but many women of Jerusalem spontaneously show him *compassion along the "via crucis"* (cf. Lk 23:27). The figure of Veronica, albeit not biblical, expresses well the feelings of the women of Jerusalem along the *via dolorosa*.

Beneath the cross there is only one Apostle, John, the son of Zebedee, whereas *there are several women* (cf. Mt 27:55-56): the Mother of Christ who, according to tradition, had followed him on his journey to Calvary; Salome, the mother of the sons of Zebedee, John and James; Mary, the mother of James the Less and Joseph; and Mary Magdalen. All these women were fearless witnesses of Jesus' agony; all were present at the anointing and the *laying of his body in the tomb*. After his burial, as the day before the Sabbath draws to a close, they depart, but with the intention of returning as soon as it is allowed. And it is they who will be the first to go to the tomb, early in the morning on the day after the feast. They will be *the first witnesses of the empty tomb*, and

again they will be the ones to tell the Apostles (cf. Jn 20:1-2). Mary Magdalen, lingering at the tomb in tears, is the first to meet the Risen One, who sends her to the Apostles as the first herald of his Resurrection (cf. Jn 20:11-18). With good reason therefore the Eastern tradition places Mary Magdalen almost on a par with the Apostles, since she was the first to proclaim the truth of the Resurrection, followed by the Apostles and Christ's disciples.

Thus women too, together with men, have a part in the prophetic mission of Christ. And the same can be said of their sharing in his priestly and royal mission. *The universal priesthood of the faithful and the royal dignity* belong to both men and women. Most enlightening in this regard is a careful reading of the passages of the First Letter of St Peter (2:9-10) and of the Conciliar Constitution *Lumen gentium* (nn. 10-12; 34-36).

7. In that Dogmatic Constitution, the chapter on the People of God is followed by the one on the hierarchical structure of the Church. Here reference is made to the *ministerial priesthood*, to which by the will of Christ only men are admitted. Today in some quarters the fact that women cannot be ordained priests is being interpreted as a form of discrimination. But is this really the case?

Certainly, the question could be put in these terms if the hierarchical priesthood granted a social position of privilege characterized by the exercise of "power". But this is not the case: the ministerial priesthood, in Christ's plan, is an expression not of *domination* but of *service!* Anyone who interpreted it as "domination" would certainly be far from the intention of Christ, who in the Upper Room began the Last Supper by washing the feet of the Apostles. In this way he strongly emphasized the "ministerial" character of the priesthood which he instituted that very evening. "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45).

Yes, dear Brothers, the priesthood which today we recall with such veneration as our special inheritance *is a ministerial priesthood! We are at the service of the People of God! We are at the service of its mission! This priesthood of ours must guarantee the participation of everyone - men and women alike - in the threefold prophetic, priestly and royal mission of Christ.* And not only is the Sacrament of Holy Orders ministerial: *above all else the Eucharist itself is ministerial.* When Christ affirms that: "This is my Body which is given for you... This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my Blood" (Lk 22:19, 20), he reveals his greatest service: *the service of the Redemption*, in which the Only-Begotten and Eternal Son of God becomes the *Servant of man* in the fullest and most profound sense.

8. Beside *Christ the Servant*, we cannot forget the one who is "the Handmaid", Mary. St Luke tells us that, at the decisive moment of the Annunciation, the Virgin expressed her "fiat" in these words: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord" (Lk 1:38). The relationship of priests to women as mothers and sisters is enriched, thanks to the *Marian tradition*, by another aspect: that of service in imitation of Mary *the Handmaid*. If the priesthood is by its nature ministerial, we must live it in

union *with the Mother who is the Handmaid of the Lord*. Then our priesthood will be kept safe in her hands, indeed in her heart, and we shall be able to open it to everyone. In this way our priesthood, in all its dimensions, will be fruitful and salvific.

May the Blessed Virgin look with special affection upon us all, her well-beloved sons, on this annual celebration of our priesthood. May she especially inspire in our hearts a burning desire for holiness. As I wrote in the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*: "The new evangelization needs new evangelizers, and these are the priests who are serious about living their priesthood as a specific path towards holiness" (n. 82). *Holy Thursday*, by taking us back to the origins of our priesthood, reminds us also of the duty to strive for holiness, to be "ministers of holiness" to the men and women entrusted to our pastoral service. In this light we see how very fitting is the suggestion put forward by the Congregation for the Clergy that every Diocese should celebrate a "Day for the Sanctification of Priests" on the Feast of the Sacred Heart or on another date better suited to local needs and pastoral usage. I make this suggestion my own, and I express my hope that this Day will help priests to live in ever greater conformity to the heart of the Good Shepherd.

Upon all of you I invoke the protection of Mary, Mother of the Church, Mother of Priests, and with great affection I give you my blessing.

From the Vatican, 25 March 1995, the Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord.