



The Holy See

**LETTER OF THE HOLY FATHER
JOHN PAUL II
TO PRIESTS
FOR HOLY THURSDAY 2000**

*My Dear Brother Priests!*¹ Jesus, “having loved his own who were in the world, loved them to the end” (*Jn* 13:1). Here in Jerusalem, in the place where according to tradition Jesus and the Twelve were present for the Passover Meal and the institution of the Eucharist, I am deeply moved as I read once again the words with which the Evangelist John introduces the account of the Last Supper. I give praise to the Lord for enabling me, in this Jubilee Year of the Incarnation of his Son, to trace the earthly footsteps of Christ, following the paths which he took from his birth in Bethlehem to his death on Golgotha. Yesterday I spent time in Bethlehem, in the cave of the Nativity. In the days to come I will visit various places associated with the life and ministry of the Saviour, from the house of the Annunciation to the Mount of the Beatitudes and the Garden of Olives. Finally on Sunday I will be at Golgotha and the Holy Sepulchre. Today, this visit to the Upper Room gives me an opportunity to survey the entire mystery of the Redemption. It was here that Christ gave us the immense gift of the Eucharist. Here too our priesthood was born. ***A letter from the Upper Room***². From this Upper Room I would like to address this letter to you, as I have done for more than twenty years, on Holy Thursday, the day of the Eucharist and “our” day *par excellence*. I am indeed writing to you from the Upper Room, thinking back to all that took place within these walls on that evening charged with mystery. Spiritually, I see Jesus and the Apostles seated at table with him. I think of Peter especially: it is as if I can see him, with the other disciples, watching in amazement the Lord's actions, listening with deep emotion to his words and, for all the burden of his frailty, opening himself to the mystery proclaimed here and soon to be accomplished. These are the hours of the great battle between the love which gives itself without reserve and the *mysterium iniquitatis* which is imprisoned in hostility. The betrayal of Judas appears emblematic of humanity's sin. “It was night”, observes the Evangelist John (13:30): the hour of darkness, an hour of separation and of infinite sadness. Yet in the emotion-filled words of Christ the light of dawn already shines forth: “I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you” (*Jn* 16:22).³ We must never cease meditating anew on the mystery of that night. We should often return in spirit to this Upper Room, where we priests especially can feel in a sense “at home”. With regard to the Upper Room, it could be said of us what the Psalmist says of the peoples with regard to Jerusalem: “In the register of peoples, the Lord will write: These were born here” (*Ps* 86:6). In this holy room I naturally find myself imagining you in all the various parts of the world, with your myriad faces, some younger, some more advanced in years, in all the different emotional states which you are experiencing: for many, thank God, joy and enthusiasm, for others perhaps suffering or weariness or discouragement. In all of you I honour the image of Christ which you received at your consecration, the “character” which marks each of you indelibly. It is a sign of the special love which

every priest has come to know and upon which he can always rely, either to move ahead joyfully or to make a fresh start with renewed enthusiasm, in the hope of ever greater fidelity. ***Born of love***⁴. “Having loved his own who were in the world, Jesus loved them to the end”. In contrast to the Synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of John does not relate the institution of the Eucharist, of which Jesus had already spoken at length in Capernaum (cf. *Jn* 6:26-65); instead it dwells upon the washing of the feet. Even more than an example of humility offered for our imitation, this action of Jesus, so disconcerting to Peter, is a revelation of the radicalness of God's condescension towards us. In Christ, God has “stripped himself”, and has taken on “the form of a slave” even to the utter abasement of the Cross (cf. *Phil* 2:7), so that humanity might have access to the depths of God's very life. The great speeches which in John's Gospel follow the washing of the feet and are in some way commentaries upon it, serve as an introduction to the mystery of Trinitarian communion to which we are called by the Father who makes us sharers in Christ by the gift of the Spirit. This communion must be lived in compliance with the new commandment: “Love one another as I have loved you” (*Jn* 13:34). It is not by chance that the priestly prayer is the culmination of this “mystagogy”, since it shows us Christ in his oneness with the Father, ready to return to him through the sacrifice of himself, and wanting only that the disciples come to share his unity with the Father: “As you, Father, are in me and I in you, may they too be one in us” (*Jn* 17:21).⁵ From the small group of disciples who heard these words the whole Church was formed, growing through time and space as “a people gathered together by the unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (Saint Cyprian, *De Orat. Dom.*, 23). The profound unity of this new people does not mean that there are not different and complementary tasks in its life. Those whose task it is to renew *in persona Christi* what Jesus did at the Last Supper when he instituted the Eucharistic Sacrifice, “the source and summit of the entire Christian life” (*Lumen Gentium*, 11), are thus linked in a special way to those first Apostles. The sacramental character which distinguishes them by virtue of their reception of Holy Orders ensures that their presence and ministry are unique, indispensable and irreplaceable. Almost two thousand years have passed since that moment. How many priests have repeated what Jesus did! Often they were exemplary disciples, saints, martyrs. How can we forget, in this Jubilee Year, the many priests who have witnessed to Christ by their lives, even to the shedding of blood? Such martyrdom has accompanied the entire history of the Church; it has also marked the century just passed, a century characterized by different dictatorial regimes hostile to the Church. From the Upper Room, I wish to thank the Lord for the courage of these priests. Let us look to them and learn to follow them in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd who “lays down his life for his sheep” (*Jn* 10:11). ***A treasure in earthen vessels***⁶. It is true that in the history of the priesthood, no less than in the history of the whole People of God, the dark presence of sin is also found. Many times, the human frailty of priests has made it hard to see in them the face of Christ. Here in the Upper Room why should this amaze us? Not only did the betrayal of Judas reach its climax here, but Peter himself had to reckon with his weakness as he heard the bitter prediction of his denial. In choosing men like the Twelve, Christ was certainly under no illusions: it was upon this human weakness that he set the sacramental seal of his presence. And Paul shows us why: “We bear this treasure in earthen vessels, so that it might be clear that this extraordinary power comes from God and not from us” (*2 Cor* 4:7). For all the frailties of their priests, then, the People of God have not ceased to put their faith in the power of Christ at work through their ministry. How can we fail in this regard to recall the splendid witness of Saint Francis of Assisi? Humility led him not to seek the priesthood, but in his Testament he expressed his faith in the mystery of Christ present in priests, declaring that he would turn to them even if they had persecuted him, taking no account of their sin. “And I do this”, he explained, “because the only thing I see of the flesh of the most high Son of God in this world is his most holy Body and Blood which they alone consecrate and they alone administer to others” (*Fonti Francescane*, No. 113).⁷ From this place where Christ spoke the words instituting the Eucharist, I invite you, dear priests, to rediscover the “gift” and the “mystery” which we have received. To go to the heart of it, we must reflect upon the priesthood of Christ. Certainly, the entire People of God

participates in this priesthood by Baptism. But the Second Vatican Council reminds us that, in addition to the participation proper to all the baptized, there exists another specific, ministerial participation which, although intimately linked to the first, nonetheless differs from it in essence (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 10). In the context of the Jubilee of the Incarnation, we can approach the priesthood of Christ from a particular perspective. The Jubilee invites us to contemplate the intimate link between Christ's priesthood and the mystery of his person. The priesthood of Christ is not "incidental", a task which he might or might not have assumed: rather, it is integral to his identity as the Son Incarnate, as God-made-man. From now on, the relationship between mankind and God passes wholly through Christ: "No one comes to the Father, except through me" (*Jn* 14:6). This is why Christ is a priest endowed with an eternal and universal priesthood, of which the priesthood of the first Covenant was a prefigurement and a preparation (cf. *Heb* 9:9). He has exercised it fully from the moment he took his seat as High Priest "at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven" (*Heb* 8:1). From that time forth, the very nature of human priesthood changed: now there is but one priesthood, that of Christ, which can be shared and exercised in different ways. ***Sacerdos et Hostia***⁸. At the same time, the meaning of sacrifice, the priestly act *par excellence*, was brought to perfection. On Golgotha, Christ made his own life an offering of eternal value, a "redemptive" offering which has reopened for ever the path of communion with God which had been blocked by sin. The Letter to the Hebrews casts light upon this mystery by placing on the lips of Christ the words of Psalm 40: "You desired neither sacrifice nor offering, but instead you prepared a body for me... Here I am... I come to do your will, O God" (*Heb* 10:5-7; cf. *Ps* 40:7-9). According to the author of the Letter, these prophetic words were spoken by Christ when he first came into the world. They express his mystery and his mission. They begin to be accomplished from the very moment of the Incarnation and reach their completion in the sacrifice of Golgotha. From that time forward, every priestly offering is but a re-presenting to the Father of the one offering of Christ, made once for all. ***Sacerdos et Hostia!*** Priest and Victim! This sacrificial aspect is a profound mark of the Eucharist; it is also an essential dimension of the priesthood of Christ and, therefore, of our own priesthood. In the light of this, let us read once again the words we speak every day, words which echoed for the first time here in the Upper Room: "Take this, all of you, and eat it: this is my Body which will be given up for you... Take this, all of you, and drink from it: this is the cup of my Blood, the Blood of the new and everlasting Covenant which will be shed for you and for all, so that sins may be forgiven". These are the words we find in the Evangelists and in Paul, with largely converging redactional forms. They were spoken in this Room in the late evening of Holy Thursday. By giving the Apostles his Body to eat and his Blood to drink, Jesus declared the deepest truth about what he would do shortly thereafter on Golgotha. For in the Bread of the Eucharist is present the very Body born of Mary and offered on the Cross: *Ave verum Corpus natum de Maria Virgine, Vere passum, immolatum in cruce pro homine*.⁹ How can we not return ever anew to this mystery, which contains the entire life of the Church? For two thousand years, this Sacrament has given nourishment to countless believers. It has been the source of great river of grace. How many saints have found in it not only the pledge, but as it were the foretaste of Heaven! Let us allow ourselves to be carried along by the contemplative impulse, rich in poetry and theology, which inspired Saint Thomas Aquinas to sing of the mystery in the words of the hymn *Pange Lingua*. Today, in this Upper Room, these words come to me as an echo of the voice of so many Christian communities throughout the world, of so many priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful, who each day pause in adoration of the Eucharistic mystery: *Verbum caro, panem verum verbo carnem efficit, fitque sanguis Christi merum, et, si sensus deficit, ad firmandum cor sincerum sola fides sufficit. Do this in memory of me*¹⁰. The mystery of the Eucharist, which proclaims and celebrates the Death and Resurrection of Christ until he comes again, is the heart of the Church's life. For us it also has a very special meaning, for it stands at the centre of our ministry. Our ministry is not of course limited to celebrating

the Eucharist: it is a service which includes the proclamation of the Word, the sanctification of the faithful through the Sacraments, and the leadership of God's People in communion and service. But the Eucharist is the point from which everything else comes forth and to which it all returns. Our priesthood was born in the Upper Room together with the Eucharist. "Do this in memory of me" (*Lk 22:19*): although addressed to the whole Church, the words of Christ are entrusted as a particular task to those who carry on the ministry of the first Apostles. It is to them that Jesus hands on the action which he has just performed—changing bread into his Body and wine into his Blood—the action in which he appears as Priest and Victim. It is the will of Christ that henceforth his action should also become sacramentally the action of the Church through the hands of priests. In saying "Do this", he refers not only to the action, but also to the one who is called to act; in other words, he institutes the ministerial priesthood, which thus becomes one of the essential elements of the Church.¹¹ This action is to be done "in his memory": these words are important. The Eucharistic action celebrated by priests will make present in every Christian generation, in every corner of the earth, the work accomplished by Christ. Wherever the Eucharist is celebrated, the bloody sacrifice of Calvary will be made present in an unbloody manner; there Christ himself, the Redeemer of the world, will be present. "Do this in memory of me". Hearing these words once again within the walls of the Upper Room, it is natural to try to imagine what Christ felt. These were the dramatic hours which preceded the Passion. The Evangelist John evokes the intensity of the Master's words as he prepares the Apostles for his departure. What sadness was in their eyes: "Because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts" (*Jn 16:6*). But Jesus reassures them: "I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you" (*Jn 14:18*). Although the Paschal Mystery will take him from their sight, he will be more present than ever in their life, "always, to the close of the age" (*Mt 28:20*). **A memorial which makes present**¹². Christ's presence will be expressed in many ways. But of these his Eucharistic presence will certainly be supreme: no mere remembrance, but a "memorial" which makes present what it commemorates; not a symbolic evocation of the past, but the living presence of the Lord in the midst of his own. The enduring guarantee of this will be the Holy Spirit, constantly poured out in the Eucharistic celebration so that the bread and wine may become the Body and Blood of Christ. He is the same Spirit who on the evening of Easter, in this Upper Room, was "breathed" upon the Apostles (cf. *Jn 20:22*), and who found them here still, gathered with Mary, on the day of Pentecost. It was then that he came upon them as a strong wind and fire (cf. *Acts 2:1-4*), and impelled them to go to the ends of the earth to proclaim the Word and gather together the People of God in the "breaking of the bread" (cf. *Acts 2:42*).¹³ Two thousand years after the birth of Christ, in this Jubilee Year, we especially need to remember and ponder the truth of what we might call his "Eucharistic birth". The Upper Room is the place of this "birth". Here began a new presence of Christ for the world, a presence which constantly occurs wherever the Eucharist is celebrated and a priest lends his voice to Christ, repeating the sacred words of institution. This Eucharistic presence has accompanied the two thousand years of the Church's history, and it will do so until the end of time. For us it is both a joy and a source of responsibility to be so closely linked to this mystery. Today we want to become more deeply aware of this presence, our hearts filled with wonder and gratitude, and in this spirit to enter the Easter Triduum of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ. **What the Upper Room hands on to us**¹⁴. My dear brother priests, who on Holy Thursday gather in the Cathedrals around your Pastors, just as the presbyters of the Church in Rome gather around the Successor of Peter, please accept these reflections, my meditation in the evocative setting of the Upper Room! It would be hard to find a place better able to stir thoughts of both the Eucharistic mystery and the mystery of our priesthood. Let us remain faithful to what the Upper Room "hands on" to us, to the great gift of Holy Thursday. May we always celebrate the Holy Eucharist with fervour. May we dwell long and often in adoration before Christ in the Eucharist. May we sit at the "school" of the Eucharist. Through the centuries, countless priests have found in the Eucharist the consolation promised by Jesus on the evening of the Last Supper, the secret to overcoming their solitude, the strength to bear their sufferings, the nourishment

to make a new beginning after every discouragement, and the inner energy to bolster their decision to remain faithful. The witness which we give to the People of God in celebrating the Eucharist depends in large part upon our own personal relationship with the Eucharist.¹⁵ Let us rediscover our priesthood in the light of the Eucharist! Let us help our communities to rediscover this treasure in the daily celebration of Holy Mass, and especially in the more solemn Sunday assembly. Through your apostolic labours, may love for Christ present in the Eucharist grow stronger. This is a particularly important goal in this Jubilee Year. I think of the International Eucharistic Congress to be held in Rome from 18-25 June, which has as its theme *Jesus Christ, the one Saviour of the World, Bread for new Life*. It will be a highlight of the Great Jubilee, which is meant to be “an intensely Eucharistic year” (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 55). The Congress will emphasize the profound link between the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word and the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Christ's Real Presence. From the Upper Room, I embrace you in the Eucharist. May the image of Christ surrounded by his own at the Last Supper fill each of us with a vibrant sense of brotherhood and communion. Great painters have employed their finest gifts in depicting the face of Christ among his Apostles in the scene of the Last Supper: how can we forget Leonardo's masterpiece? But only the Saints, by the intensity of their love, can enter the depths of this mystery, leaning their head, as it were, like John, on the Lord's breast (cf. *Jn 13:25*). Here in fact we come to the height of love: “having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end”.¹⁶ I would like to conclude these thoughts, which I affectionately entrust to your meditation, with the words of an ancient prayer: “We thank you, our Father, for the life and the knowledge which you have revealed to us through Jesus, your servant. Glory to you through the ages! As the bread we have broken was scattered far and wide upon the hills, but when harvested becomes one, so may the Church be gathered into your Kingdom from the farthest reaches of the earth... Lord almighty, you created the universe for the glory of your name; you gave men food and drink to strengthen them, that they might give you thanks; but to us you have given spiritual food and drink, and eternal life through your Son... Glory to you through the ages!” (*Didache* 9:3-4; 10:3-4). From the Upper Room, dear brother priests, I embrace all of you in spirit and I cordially impart my blessing. *From Jerusalem, 23 March 2000. IOANNES PAULUS PP. II* © Copyright 2000 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana