



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO A GROUP OF PRIESTS
FROM THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

Friday, 16 December 1983

Dear Brothers in Christ,

I am happy to greet you today - you who have come to Rome to participate for several weeks in a program of renewal, through the Institute for Continuing Theological Education at the North American College. I am aware that, in addition to your academic study, this period offers you time for spiritual reflection and personal renewal, all of which will be of assistance to you as you share in the priesthood of Jesus Christ.

Concerning the Lord's mission, Saint Paul tells us: "in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself . . . and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5, 19). As priests, we are charged with being Christ's ambassadors of reconciliation, allowing him to make his saving appeal to the world through us. But, in order to fulfill this role effectively, we must first embrace that message ourselves and permit it to take root in our very being. We cannot preach the message of reconciliation to others, unless we are convinced of its saving truth for our own lives.

In your pastoral ministry, there are numerous ways in which you are able to bring the Lord's reconciling love to his people, but perhaps one of the most enriching is found in the celebration of the sacrament of Penance. Here, in allowing penitents the opportunity personally to confess their sins to the Lord, you mediate one of the most profoundly religious moments of forgiveness and joy. In this sacramental encounter - an experience so deeply intimate - we find Christ forgiving, strengthening and leading each person back to the fullness of life. And he has chosen us, his priests, to be the only ones to forgive sins in his name. This ministry, therefore, is uniquely ours and it is one to which we must give priority.

My brothers, as you return to your respective Dioceses, I trust that you will bear witness to this message of reconciliation with new strength and enthusiasm. Encourage your people to have deep confidence in the Lord's merciful love. Offer the needy, the suffering, and those in trouble the comfort of Christ's understanding and consolation. And encourage all to experience the depth of his forgiveness, as well as the hope of his new life which is available in a unique and marvellous way through the sacrament of Penance.

May God sustain you in this work and may he grant to you and your loved ones an abundance of his blessings.

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