



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER POPE JOHN PAUL II TO THE BISHOPS OF CANADA ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT

Monday, 7 November 1988

Dear brother Bishops,

1. On the occasion of your *ad Limina* visit, I welcome each of you in a spirit of fraternal love, and I send greetings to all of your local Churches: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ". I am very pleased to have this opportunity to meet with you in order to strengthen even further the close ties which exist between the Holy See and the Canadian Hierarchy and to encourage you in your ministry to the People of God.

I wish to reflect with you for a few moments on our Christian vocation, on the fact that we are called by God to serve him in the Church and in the world. Human existence derives its very purpose from a call addressed to us by the one who is totally "other", the Lord God. It is addressed to humanity in both creation and in redemption. In Genesis, God called Adam and Eve "to fill the earth and subdue it". In Christ, the new Adam, God calls human beings to an even greater glory: to live in perfect communion with one another and with the Most Blessed Trinity. As we read in "*Gaudium et Spes*": "Christ... fully reveals man to himself and makes man's supreme calling clear".

The Church has been called into existence as a sacrament of salvation in Christ. Each of her members is called to fulfill the Church's mission through sacramental worship, through holiness of life, and through witness to the Gospel in word and deed.

2. Although the mystery of our vocation is deeply rooted within us, it is nevertheless obscured by sin. It is a struggle for us to conform our freedom to God's call. In our sinfulness we rebel against his will for us. Like our first parents, we are tempted to decide for ourselves what is good and what is bad, independently of the God who made us. Great indeed is this temptation for much of today's world, in which technological progress and material prosperity can obscure the transcendent dimension of our vocation and distract us from the ultimate questions concerning our existence.

We are reminded of Christ's sobering words: "What will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life"; or again: "The gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life".

Christ accomplishes our redemption and shows us by word and example that "to serve is to reign". Far from diminishing man, obedience to God's will brings life in abundance, and alone makes possible the self-realization, peace and joy for which we were created and for which we yearn.

Love is perfected by being tested – in suffering, in self-giving, through the cross. Wayward minds are thus converted to divine wisdom. Closed hearts are made capable of receiving divine love. Blinded eyes are opened to what is unseen.

Whatever shadows fall on life in this age or in any age, the Church "rejoices in hope". She knows that "where sin increases, grace abounds all the more". In proclaiming man's God-given vocation in creation and redemption, she looks with confidence to him who "by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think". She has unshakable faith in the reality of personal freedom and responsibility in responding to God's call.

3. The Second Vatican Council placed great emphasis on the notion of vocation. It challenged all of God's people to respond more generously to the mission that is theirs through Baptism, so that they in turn might lead every person to the realization that he or she is personally called by God in Christ to share the gift of eternal life. We give thanks to God that so many of Christ's faithful have taken this challenge to heart. At the same time, we also recognize the pressing need in our day for more vocations to the ministerial priesthood in particular and to the religious life. The need for these vocations is keenly felt both in Canada and in much of the rest of the world. It is absolutely essential for the faithful to have true shepherds whose priestly ordination enables them to exercise the unique and sublime ministry of consecrating and absolving, and whose lives are a sacramental sign of the presence of Christ the Good Shepherd in the midst of his flock. At a time when many people are unchurched in your country and elsewhere, and when there is a sense of uncertainty, alienation or indifference among many Catholics, it is vital that priestly ministry and religious consecration should not be lacking in the Church.

4. In order to respond to these special needs, we must first reflect on the dynamics of God's call in a person's life. In this Decree on the Life and Ministry of Priests, the Second Vatican Council makes reference to the following words of Paul VI: "The voice of God which calls expresses itself in two different ways that are marvellous and converging; one interior: that of grace, that of the Holy Spirit, that inexpressible interior attraction which the silent and powerful voice of the Lord exercises in the unfathomable depths of the human soul; and the other one external, human, sensible, social, juridical, concrete". This convergence of the internal and external dimensions applies to every vocation within the sacramental economy instituted by Christ, whether it be the initial call to faith and membership in his body, the Church, or the special vocations to the ministerial priesthood and to consecrated life.

5. The interior aspect of God's call reminds us of a fundamental truth: every vocation is the result of a divine initiative, it is a gift from God. Therefore, as Jesus himself tells us we must "pray the lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest" since "the harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few". In discerning "the signs of the times", we must ponder the deep meaning that these words have for the Church in every age.

Today there are those who interpret the decline in priestly vocations since the Council as a sign that the ministerial priesthood is to be superseded or greatly diminished, rather than complemented, by new forms of ministry. Others argue that the requirement of celibacy for all Latin Rite priests should be abolished; still others claim that traditional doctrine about the priesthood, which is rooted in the institution of this Sacrament by Christ and in Christian theology, should be abandoned, as of this were possible, so that women could be ordained to the priesthood. In these ways, it is asserted or implied, an abundance of labourers will be assured for the Lord's harvest.

May we not rather say that in keeping with God's ways and not our own, the ordained priesthood and the Church's love and understanding of it are being tested, precisely so that what is essential may be strengthened, purified and renewed in a spiritual rebirth to greater fruitfulness? If we are being brought to our knees, so to speak, by the need for more priests, is it not in order that we may understand with greater humility and love who the Lord of the harvest truly is? As Paul VI wisely taught us: "Christ did not hesitate to confide the formidable task of evangelizing the world... to a handful of men to all appearances lacking in number and quality. He bade this ' little flock ' not to lose heart, for, thanks to his constant assistance... they would overcome the world. Jesus has taught us also that the kingdom of God has an intrinsic and unobservable dynamism which enables it to grow without man's awareness of it. The harvest of God's kingdom is great, but the labourers, as in the beginning, are few. Actually, they have never been as numerous as human standards would have judged sufficient. But the Lord of the kingdom demands prayers, that it may be he... who will send out labourers... The counsels and prudence of man cannot supersede the hidden wisdom of him who, in the history of salvation, has challenged man's wisdom and power by his own foolishness and weakness".

Dear brothers, the Church's "foolishness and weakness" in the eyes of the world are in direct proportion to the trust she has in her crucified Lord, in his words and deeds, in his example and his promises.

She knows that she is a "sign of contradiction", and that the spiritual riches of her doctrine and discipline bear witness to a divine wisdom not of this world, yet destined for the world's salvation. In discerning the "signs of the times" with regard to vocations, we must recognize our own need for constant conversion, even as we "pray the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest".

6. Puisque la vocation nous est offerte comme un don, notre liberté humaine est essentielle quand il s'agit de l'accueillir ou de la rejeter. Nous pouvons penser au jeune homme riche de l'Évangile qui a refusé l'appel particulier du Christ parce qu'il avait de grands biens. D'où l'importance du caractère extérieur de la vocation, à savoir les aspects "humain, sensible, social, juridique et concret", qui doivent nourrir et encourager l'appel que Dieu adresse à une personne, si l'on veut que cet appel ne soit ni négligé ni étouffé. Très souvent, de même que pour le prophète Elie, l'appel du Seigneur ne se présente pas comme un ouragan ni comme un tremblement de terre ni comme un feu dévorant, mais plutôt comme "le bruit d'une brise légère". La personne appelée doit discerner l'authenticité de cette voix intérieure, non pas dans le vide, mais dans le cadre d'une culture et d'une société déterminées, d'une famille et d'une école, d'une paroisse et d'un diocèse.

Il est vrai qu'aujourd'hui le foyer, l'école, la paroisse et le diocèse sont secoués par les vents du changement. Au milieu de grands bouleversements dans la façon de penser et de se conduire, qui sont des défis et des remises en question pour la foi et la pratique chrétiennes, l'Église cherche à se renouveler elle-même, non pas en se conformant au monde, mais "par une fidélité plus grande à sa vocation". Une fidélité accrue nous conduit à plus de clarté et plus de force de conviction dans ce que l'Église croit et enseigne, y compris la grandeur et la nécessité du sacerdoce et de la vie religieuse. C'est une composante essentielle d'un environnement qui permet aux vocations de s'épanouir. Si les bases d'une saine ecclésiologie, des sacrements ou de l'ascèse chrétienne sont ébranlées dans l'esprit ou le cœur des fidèles, alors inévitablement l'appel de Dieu au sacerdoce, à la vie religieuse – et même au mariage chrétien – ne sera plus concrètement perceptible. Le "bruit de la brise légère" sera étouffé plutôt qu'amplifié par ce qui est "extérieur, humain, sensible, social, juridique et concret".

7. Chers frères, je connais bien les efforts que vous faites, avec vos frères dans l'épiscopat canadien, afin de promouvoir les vocations au sacerdoce et à la vie consacrée.

Vous avez pris à cœur l'exhortation que le Concile adresse aux évêques: il leur demande d'aider ceux que Dieu appelle à son service et de rechercher la collaboration active de tout le Peuple de Dieu pour cultiver ces vocations. J'ai confiance que les fidèles de vos diocèses continueront à coopérer à cette grande œuvre par une vie chrétienne exemplaire, par une prière et une pénitence accrues, ainsi que par le désir de mieux comprendre l'importance de ces vocations particulières pour la vocation chrétienne de chacun et de tous. Nous pouvons être sûrs que le "Maître de la moisson" ne nous abandonnera pas.

Le modèle de toute vocation qui vient de Dieu se trouve en Marie, la Mère de l'Église. Par son "fiat" d'humble servante du Seigneur, non seulement elle s'est rendue disponible à une effusion de dons divine, mais encore elle a donné naissance au Rédempteur qui a permis à chaque personne d'entendre et d'accepter l'appel de Dieu. Je prie pour que vous et vos Églises particulières fassiez toujours l'expérience de la puissante et maternelle intercession de Marie, et de grand cœur, je vous donne à tous ma Bénédiction Apostolique.

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