



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY**

Thursday, 15 October 1998

Your Eminences,

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,

1. I am pleased to meet you during the plenary assembly of the Congregation for the Clergy, which brings you together with sentiments of deep love for that unique “gift and mystery” which is the ministerial priesthood. I cordially greet you, with a special thought for Cardinal Darío Castrillón Hoyos, who has addressed me with noble devotion and affection on behalf of you all.

The purpose of your plenary meeting is to help priests cross the threshold of the Holy Door of the now imminent Great Jubilee with the proper frame of mind, bearing in their hearts renewed sentiments of fidelity to their specific identity and commitment in their dedication to the missionary dynamics that stem from it.

You have fittingly chosen as the topic of your reflection a theme of fundamental importance: “*The priest, leader of the community, teacher of the word and minister of the sacraments, in the perspective of the new evangelization*”. This theme takes on its full meaning when examined in the light of the Jubilee. Indeed, the Holy Year of 2000 is not only meant to celebrate a unique chronological event, but to commemorate the “*magnalia Dei*” (cf. Acts 1), documented in the 2,000-year-old history of the Church, of which the Incarnation of the Word is an extension in different times and places. The Jubilee is meant to create a heart “*contrite and humbled*” over our personal sins, to revive missionary fervour in the awareness that only Jesus Christ is the Saviour, to lead each person to the joy of experiencing the merciful love of God, who wants all human beings to be saved (cf. 1 Tm 2:4).

2. Christ's priesthood is a consequence of the Incarnation. Born of the ever-Virgin Mary, the Only-begotten Son of God entered the order of history. He became a priest, the one priest, and for this reason those in the Church who receive the dignity of the ordained priesthood share in a particular way in the one priesthood of Christ. The ordained priesthood is an irreplaceable element in the edifice of Redemption; it is a channel through which the fresh waters necessary to life normally flow. This priesthood, to which one is called as pure gift (cf. Heb. 5:4), is the nerve-centre of the Church's whole life and mission.

Through the sacrament of Orders, the priest is transformed into "Christ himself" in order to accomplish Christ's works. His conformation to Christ the Head and Shepherd comes about through a specific character. This indelible character is the inseparable mark of priestly consecration (cf. *Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 2; *Lumen gentium*, n. 21; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1558): a gift of God, given for ever! The priest anointed in the Holy Spirit must therefore pledge absolute and unconditional fidelity to the Lord and to his Church, because commitment to the priesthood bears in itself the sign of eternity.

The priest, like Christ and in Christ, is sent. The saving "mission" that is entrusted to him for the good of mankind is required by his "priestly consecration" itself (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 28) and is already implicit in the "call" God has given the man. Thus "vocation, consecration and mission" form the triptych of a single reality and are constitutive elements of the essential nature of the priesthood (cf. *Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 16).

3. To recall these realities, to speak of the indispensability of the ordained priesthood amounts to performing an action today which, for anyone who takes a close look at ecclesial life, can only seem truly providential. Indeed, more or less explicit attempts have been made to alter the whole ecclesial event as willed by the Divine Founder. It in fact goes back to Christ's will that his Church, the People of God on pilgrimage, should be established and structured as a hierarchically ordered society (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 20), in which all enjoy the same dignity, but all do not have the same tasks. Instead, through a diversity of ministries, that is, of offices or services, each contributes, according to his own state, to bearing witness to the Gospel in the world.

For this reason I encourage you in your commitment to emphasizing the priest's mission in light of the reflection you are engaged in at this plenary session.

4. *The priest is first and foremost the leader of the people entrusted to him.* The Church's structure transcends both the "democratic" and "autocratic" models, because it is founded on the Father's "sending" of his Son and on the conferral of a "mission" through the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Twelve and to their successors (cf. Jn 20:21). This teaching is already found in *Presbyterorum ordinis*, where the Council's Decree speaks of the "authority by which Christ himself builds up, sanctifies and rules his Body" (cf. n. 2). This is an authority which does not originate from below and therefore its extension and exercise cannot be defined by any assembly from below.

The priest, in union with his Bishop, is also a teacher of the Word. He teaches it by first being its servant (cf. *Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 4). All the faithful, by virtue of the sacraments of Christian initiation, are called to evangelize according to their own state of life, but the ordained minister carries out this mission with an authority and grace which do not come from knowledge and skill, however necessary, but from ordination (cf. *Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 35).

Lastly, the priest is a minister of the sacraments. Indeed, evangelization cannot be authentic if it does not lead to the celebration of the sacraments. Thus, there can be no evangelization that is not directed to this celebration (cf. *Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 5).

5. All this must be lived in the perspective of the new evangelization, which will receive an important impulse from the Great Jubilee. Here we find a providential convergence of the paths marked out by the Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente* and those indicated by the Directories for priests and for permanent deacons, by the *Instruction on Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priests* and by all that will result from this plenary meeting.

Through the universal and convinced application of these documents, the commonly used expression “new evangelization” will become an effective reality. The very title of your plenary meeting focuses on the particular nature of the priest, his being in the Church and in relationship to her (cf. *Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 16). Helping priests rediscover the essential features of the sacred ministry will be the best way to prepare them to cross the threshold of the Holy Door, converted to the truth about themselves: that of persons conformed to Christ the Head and Shepherd by virtue of a special character. Mission stems this alone. It requires that every Christian be exactly himself and act accordingly. Hence we can understand why the various states of life in the Church cannot be replaced.

It is necessary, therefore, to continue clarifying the specific identity of each person. Only by respecting the different and complementary identities will the Church be fully believing and thus credible, and be able to enter the new millennium, rich in hope (cf. *Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 12).

In this perspective, as I invite you to put your projects in the hands of the One who, like the dawn, foretold the ever new coming of the Lord Jesus in history, I impart my Blessing to you all.