



# The Holy See

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**LETTER OF THE HOLY FATHER  
JOHN PAUL II  
TO BISHOP GASTON POULAIN  
FOR THE 4th CENTENARY OF THE PRIESTLY ORDINATION  
OF ST VINCENT DE PAUL**

*To the Most Reverend Gaston Poulain*

*Bishop of Périgueux and Sarlat*<sup>1</sup>. As the Diocese of Périgueux and the Vincentian family celebrate the fourth centenary of the priestly ordination of St Vincent de Paul, I am happy to add my prayer and thanksgiving to this event which is taking place during the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. It was, in fact, on 23 September 1600 that the young Vincent de Paul received the sacrament of Orders from the hands of your predecessor, Bishop François de Bourdeille of Périgueux, in the church of Château-l'Évêque. While he had aspired to an "honest retirement", his encounter with men of faith such as Pierre de Bérulle, and especially his discovery of the corporal and spiritual misery of the poor, would soon lead Vincent to a decisive change in his way of understanding and living his priesthood. His principal concern, which remains so timely, would now be the preaching of the Good News to the most materially and spiritually destitute. It became obvious to him that evangelization was a responsibility for all the baptized, the whole Church. Moreover, it is with the laity, men and women, that he undertook his first great works. However, he would shortly see that the benefits of mission cannot endure if the flame is not kept alive by zealous and well-trained priests who base their lives and ministry on their intimate encounter with Christ. For Monsieur Vincent, in fact, priests are irreplaceable in their role among the souls whom God has entrusted to them. In addition, an awareness of the difficult situation in which many priests in France were then living, especially in the countryside, would prompt him to take an active part in the work of clergy reform which was growing after the Council of Trent. His commitment to the service of priests and to their formation with a missionary outlook would acquire great breadth: retreats for ordinands, Tuesday conferences, the development of seminaries. Thus the Congregation of the Mission, which he founded to preach the Gospel to the poor, particularly in rural areas, would also have the vocation of helping ecclesiastics acquire the knowledge and virtues necessary to their state (cf. *Common Rules*, I, 1). Monsieur Vincent's view of the priesthood, based on his personal missionary experience, takes on a universal dimension when he says to his missionaries: "We are chosen by God as instruments of his immense and fatherly love, which seeks to be established and to spread in souls.... Our vocation is therefore to go not to a parish, nor only to a bishopric, but to the whole world. To do what? To set peoples' hearts on fire, to do what the Son of God did, he who came to bring fire to the world, to set it ablaze with his love. So it is true that I am sent not only to love God, but also to make him loved. It is not enough for me to love God, if my neighbour does not love him" (*Coste*, XII, 262).<sup>2</sup> The Jubilee Year, in which we celebrate in a special way the Incarnation of the Son of God 2,000 years ago, opens us to the

messianic mission of Christ who, consecrated by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, is sent by the Father to proclaim the Good News to the poor, to bring liberty to those deprived of it, to free the oppressed and to give back sight to the blind (cf. *Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 11). There we find Monsieur Vincent's fundamental insight, expressed vigorously in action throughout his life. Let us listen again to his call to conform ourselves to Jesus in his relationship to the Father and to men, to the poor and the needy to whom he is sent: "You must empty yourselves of self to put on Christ" (*Coste*, XI, 343), by conforming your life to that of Christ, who was entirely dedicated to God, entirely dedicated to men! The incarnate Word has a central place in Monsieur Vincent's apostolic vision: "Remember again that we live in Jesus Christ through the death of Jesus Christ ... and that our lives must be hidden in Jesus Christ and be full of Jesus Christ and that, to die as Jesus Christ, we must live as Jesus Christ" (*Coste*, I, 295). I ardently hope that the celebration of the anniversary of St Vincent de Paul's priestly ordination will be an opportunity for spiritual and missionary renewal and an encouragement to apostolic service for the priests and faithful of the Diocese of Périgueux, as well as for all the members of the Vincentian family. A man of encounter with God and with his brethren, a man of docility to the action of the Holy Spirit, Vincent de Paul invites us to renew our vision of mission in today's world. Through generous collaboration and constant mutual support, while respecting each one's vocation, may priests and lay people reach out more and more boldly to the men and women of our time in order to proclaim the Gospel to them! May Christians form living communities that are open to all, especially the most destitute and distant, bearing witness to everyone of God's personal love for him! With concern for the human and spiritual growth of individuals and groups, they will make their contribution to Jesus' messianic mission, which they are called to continue.<sup>3</sup> To be authentic witnesses to Christ today as in Monsieur Vincent's time, a sound human, doctrinal, pastoral and spiritual formation is necessary for priests, but also for the faithful. In this regard, the efforts already made and to be always pursued, especially with young people, are a source of hope for the Church's vitality and the credibility of her witness. I also hope that Monsieur Vincent's sons will continue and renew the commitment received from their founder to contribute to the formation and spiritual support of priests in an ecclesial and missionary spirit. I cordially encourage the Diocese of Périgueux in its project of resolutely starting a spiritual and pastoral search to promote the awareness, growth and support of priestly vocations. May your fervent prayers obtain for the Church priests who are wholly dedicated to God and to their brothers and sisters, the priests she needs! May the Church in France benefit from the celebrations of the fourth centenary of the ordination of St Vincent de Paul and see new vocations flourishing among young people! I would like to say again to the young people of France that the Lord is calling; I would like to say forcefully once again: do not let doubts or fear stop you! Following St Vincent's example, answer "yes" without reserve, entrusting yourselves totally to the One who is faithful to his promises! The Lord will make you joyful servants of your brothers and sisters and will give you the happiness for which you long.<sup>4</sup> Dear Brother in the Episcopate, I commend to the intercession of St Vincent de Paul the Diocese of Périgueux and Sarlat, the Church in France as well as the Vincentian family in all its diversity. I also invoke in a particular way Francis Régis Clet, a priest of the Mission whom I will have the joy of canonizing in a few days with the other martyrs of China. By generously giving his life so that the name of Christ would be proclaimed to the ends of the earth, he became a model of priestly and missionary life. To you, to your diocesans, to the spiritual family of Monsieur Vincent and to all who are taking part in the celebration of the fourth centenary, I impart a special Apostolic Blessing. *From the Vatican, 8 September 2000. IOANNES PAULUS PP. II* © Copyright 2000 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana