



The Holy See

LETTER OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO PRIESTS
FOR HOLY THURSDAY 2004

Dear Priests!

1. It is with great joy and affection that I write you this Holy Thursday Letter, following a tradition which began with my first Easter as the Bishop of Rome twenty-five years ago. Our annual encounter through this Letter is a particularly fraternal one, thanks to our common sharing in the Priesthood of Christ, and it takes place in the liturgical setting of this holy day marked by its two significant celebrations: the morning Chrism Mass, and the evening Mass *in Cena Domini*.

I think of you first as you gather in the cathedrals of your different Dioceses around your respective Ordinaries for the renewal of your priestly promises. This eloquent rite (which) takes place before the blessing of the Holy Oils, especially the Chrism, and is a most fitting part of the Chrism Mass, which highlights the image of the Church as a priestly people made holy by the sacraments and sent forth to spread throughout the world the good odour of Christ the Saviour (*2Cor 2:14-16*).

At dusk I see you entering the Upper Room for the beginning of the Easter Triduum. It is precisely to that "*large room upstairs*" (*Lk 22:12*) that Jesus invites us to return each Holy Thursday, and it is there above all that I most cherish meeting you, my dear brothers in the priesthood. At the Last Supper, *we were born as priests*: for this reason it is both a pleasure and a duty to gather once again in the Upper Room and to remind one another with heartfelt gratitude of the lofty mission which we share.

2. We were born from the Eucharist. If we can truly say that the whole Church lives from the Eucharist ("*Ecclesia de Eucharistia vivit*"), as I reaffirmed in [my recent Encyclical](#), we can say the same thing about the ministerial priesthood: it is born, lives, works and bears fruit "*de Eucharistia*" (cf. Council of Trent, Sess. XXII, canon 2: *DS 1752*). "There can be no Eucharist

without the priesthood, just as there can be no priesthood without the Eucharist” (cf. *Gift and Mystery. On the Fiftieth Anniversary of My Priestly Ordination*, New York, 1996, pp.77-78).

The ordained ministry, which may never be reduced to its merely functional aspect since it belongs on the level of “being”, enables the priest to act *in persona Christi* and culminates in the moment when he consecrates the bread and wine, repeating the actions and words of Jesus during the Last Supper.

Before this extraordinary reality we find ourselves amazed and overwhelmed, so deep is the humility by which God “stoops” in order to unite himself with man! If we feel moved before the Christmas crib, when we contemplate the Incarnation of the Word, what must we feel before the altar where, by the poor hands of the priest, Christ makes his Sacrifice present in time? We can only fall to our knees and silently adore this supreme mystery of faith.

3. “*Mysterium fidei*”, the priest proclaims after the consecration. The Eucharist is a mystery of faith, yet the priesthood itself, by reflection, is also a mystery of faith (cf. *ibid.*, p.78). The same mystery of sanctification and love, the work of the Holy Spirit, which makes the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ, is at work in the person of the minister at the moment of priestly ordination. There is a particular interplay between the Eucharist and the priesthood, an interplay which goes back to the Upper Room: these two Sacraments were born together and their destiny is indissolubly linked until the end of the world.

Here we touch on what I have called the “*apostolicity of the Eucharist*” (cf. Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 26-33). The sacrament of the Eucharist—like the sacrament of Reconciliation—was entrusted by Christ to the Apostles and has been passed down by them and their successors in every generation. At the beginning of his public life, the Messiah called the Twelve, appointed them “*to be with him*” and sent them out on mission (cf. *Mk* 3:14-15). At the Last Supper, this “being with” Jesus on the part of the Apostles reached its culmination. By celebrating the Passover meal and instituting the Eucharist, the divine Master brought their vocation to its fulfilment. By saying “*Do this in memory of me*”, he put a Eucharistic seal on their mission and, by uniting them to himself in sacramental communion, he charged them to perpetuate that most holy act in his memory.

As he pronounced the words “*Do this...*” Jesus' thoughts extended to the successors of the Apostles, to those who would continue their mission by distributing the food of life to the very ends of the earth. In some way, then, dear brother priests, in the Upper Room we too were called personally, each one of us, “with brotherly love” (*Preface of the Chrism Mass*), to receive from the Lord's sacred hands the Eucharistic Bread and to break it as food for the People of God on their pilgrim way through time towards our heavenly homeland.

4. The Eucharist, like the priesthood, is a gift from God “which radically transcends the power of

the assembly” and which the assembly “receives through episcopal succession going back to the Apostles” (Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 29). The Second Vatican Council teaches that “the ministerial priest, by the sacred power that he enjoys ... effects the Eucharistic Sacrifice in the person of Christ and offers it to God in the name of all the people” (Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 10). The assembly of the faithful, united in faith and in the Spirit and enriched by a variety of gifts, even though it is the place where Christ “is present in his Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations (Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7), is not by itself able to celebrate the Eucharist or to provide the ordained minister.

Quite rightly, then, the Christian people gives thanks to God for the gift of the Eucharist and the priesthood, while praying unceasingly that priests will never be lacking in the Church. The number of priests is never sufficient to meet the constantly increasing demands of evangelization and the pastoral care of the faithful. In some places of the world the shortage of priests is all the more urgently felt since today the number of priests is dwindling without sufficient replacements from the younger generation. In other places, thank God, we see a promising spring-time of vocations. There is also a growing awareness among the People of God of the need to pray and work actively to promote vocations to the priesthood and to the consecrated life.

5. Vocations are indeed a gift from God for which we must pray unceasingly. Following the invitation of Jesus, we need to pray the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest (cf. *Mt 9:37*). Prayer, enriched by the silent offering of suffering, remains the first and most effective means of *pastoral work for vocations*. To pray means to keep our gaze fixed on Christ, confident that from him, the one High Priest, and from his divine oblation, there will be an abundant growth, by the work of the Holy Spirit, of the seeds of those vocations needed in every age for the Church's life and mission.

Let us pause in the Upper Room and contemplate the Redeemer who instituted the Eucharist and the priesthood at the Last Supper. On that holy night he *called by name* each and every priest in every time. He looked at each one of them with the same look of loving encouragement with which he looked at Simon and Andrew, at James and John, at Nathanael beneath the fig tree, and at Matthew sitting at the tax office. Jesus has called us and, along a variety of paths, he continues to call many others to be his ministers.

From the Upper Room Christ tirelessly seeks and calls. Here we find the origin and the perennial source of an authentic pastoral promotion of priestly vocations. Let us consider ourselves, my brothers, the first ones responsible in this area, ready to help all those whom Christ wishes to associate to his priesthood to respond generously to his call.

First, however, and more than any other effort on behalf of vocations, our personal fidelity is indispensable. What counts is our personal commitment to Christ, our love for the Eucharist, our fervour in celebrating it, our devotion in adoring it and our zeal in offering it to our brothers and

sisters, especially to the sick. Jesus the High Priest continues personally to call new workers for his vineyard, but he wishes from the first to count on our active cooperation. Priests in love with the Eucharist are capable of communicating to children and young people that “*Eucharistic amazement*” which I have sought to rekindle with my Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (cf. No. 6). Generally these are the priests who lead them to the path of the priesthood, as the history of our own vocations might easily show.

6. In the light of this, dear brother priests, I would ask you, among other initiatives, to *show special care for altar servers*, who represent a kind of “garden” of priestly vocations. The group of altar servers, under your guidance as part of the parish community, can be given a valuable experience of Christian education and become a kind of pre-seminary. Help the parish, as a family made up of families, to look upon the altar servers as their own children, like “*olive shoots around the table*” of Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life (cf. *Ps. 127:3*).

With the help of the families most involved and catechists, be particularly concerned for the group of servers so that, through their service at the altar, each of them will learn to grow in love for the Lord Jesus, to recognize him truly present in the Eucharist and to experience the beauty of the liturgy. Initiatives for altar servers on the diocesan or local level should be promoted and encouraged, with attention to the different age groups. During my years of episcopal ministry in Krakow I was able to see the great benefits which can accrue from a concern for their human, spiritual and liturgical training. When children and young people serve at the altar with joy and enthusiasm, they offer their peers an eloquent witness to the importance and beauty of the Eucharist. Thanks to their own lively imagination and the explanations and example given by priests and their older friends, even very young children can grow in faith and develop a love for spiritual realities.

Finally, never forget that you yourselves are the first “Apostles” of Jesus the High Priest. Your own witness counts more than anything else. Altar servers see you at the regular Sunday and weekday celebrations; in your hands they see the Eucharist “take place”, on your face they see its mystery reflected, and in your heart they sense the summons of a greater love. May you be for them fathers, teachers and witnesses of Eucharistic piety and holiness of life!

7. Dear brother priests, your particular mission in the Church requires that you be “friends” of Christ, constantly contemplating his face with docility at the school of Mary Most Holy. Pray unceasingly, as the Apostle exhorts (cf. *1Th 5:17*), and encourage the faithful to pray for vocations, for the perseverance of those called to the priestly life and for the sanctification of all priests. Help your communities to love ever more fully that unique “gift and mystery” which is the ministerial priesthood.

In the prayerful setting of Holy Thursday, I would recall once again some invocations of the Litany of Jesus Christ Priest and Victim (cf. *Gift and Mystery*, pp.108-114), which I have recited for many

years with great spiritual profit:

*lesu, Sacerdos et Victima,
 lesu, Sacerdos qui in novissima Cena formam sacrificii perennis instituisti,
 lesu, Pontifex ex hominibus assumpte,
 lesu, Pontifex pro hominibus constitute,
 Iesus, Pontifex qui tradidisti temetipsum Deo oblationem et hostiam,
 miserere nobis!*

*Ut pastores secundum cor tuum populo tuo providere digneris,
 ut in messem tuam operarios fideles mittere digneris,
 ut fideles mysteriorum tuorum dispensatores multiplicare digneris,
 Te rogamus, audi nos!*

8. I entrust each of you and your daily ministry to Mary, Mother of Priests. During the recitation of the Rosary, the fifth mystery of light leads us to contemplate with Mary's eyes the gift of the Eucharist, to marvel at the love that Jesus showed "to the end" (Jn 13:1) in the Upper Room, and at his humble presence in every tabernacle. May the Blessed Virgin obtain for you the grace never to take for granted the mystery put in your hands. With endless gratitude to the Lord for the amazing gift of his Body and Blood, may you persevere faithfully in your priestly ministry.

Mary, Mother of Christ our High Priest, pray that the Church will always have numerous and holy vocations, faithful and generous ministers of the altar!

Dear brother priests, I wish you and your communities a Holy Easter and to all of you I affectionately impart my blessing.

From the Vatican, on 28 March, the Fifth Sunday of Lent, in the year 2004, the twenty- sixth of my Pontificate.

JOHN PAUL II