



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO THE PARISH PRIESTS AND CLERGY OF THE DIOCESE OF ROME

*Sistine Chapel
2 March 1979*

1. We meet at the beginning of Lent. In this period, each of us must renew, that is, find again in some way, above all, his own "Christian being"; the identity that springs from belonging to Christ, first of all through Baptism. The whole tradition of the Lenten period is turned in this direction, and in the ancient practice of the Church its completion was precisely, the Baptism of catechumens. Let us recall that the fundamental substratum of our "priesthood" is our "Christian being": our "priestly identity" has its roots in our "Christian identity" (*christianus—alter Christus; sacerdos—alter Christus*). Preparing with all our brothers in the faith for the renewal of baptismal promises on the vigil of Holy Saturday, we are preparing in a special way for the renewal of priestly promises in the liturgy of Holy Thursday—the day of priests. The whole time of Lent must serve for this preparation.

2. The Second Vatican Council set forth clearly and precisely the essence of the holiness characteristic of priests (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*). We must seek the concrete forms of this holiness by exercising the many tasks that belong to our vocation and our pastoral ministry. If we ask ourselves what are the elements that characterize the holiness to which the priest is called, the elements that constitute, so to speak, its *specificum*, they can rightly be indicated in two closely complementary aspects. These I would formulate as follows: a) a man completely possessed by the mystery of Christ; b) a man who builds the community of the People of God in a quite special way.

a) The priest is placed at the very centre of the mystery of Christ who constantly embraces humanity and the world, the visible creation and the invisible one. He acts, in fact, *in persona Christi*, particularly when he celebrates the Eucharist: by means of his ministry Christ continues to carry out his work of salvation in the world. Rightly, therefore, with the apostle Paul every priest

can exclaim: "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor 4:1). It is not difficult to perceive the implications that spring from this fact. I will limit myself to indicating the following:

— If the purpose of his ministry is the sanctification of others, it is obvious that the priest must feel involved in a commitment of personal holiness. He cannot "stand aside", he cannot "dispense himself" from this commitment, without condemning himself thereby to a life that is not authentic, or, to use the words of the Gospel, without changing from a "good shepherd" into a "hireling" (cf. Jn 10:11-12).

— Then there is the implication constituted by the old theological problem of the relationship between *opus operatum* and *opus operantis*. The supernatural efficacy of the sacraments depends directly on *opus operatum*; but the Second Vatican Council stressed forcefully the importance of *opus operantis*. Do you remember the words of the Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*? "While it is possible for God's grace to carry out the work of salvation through unworthy ministers, yet God ordinarily prefers to show his wonders through those men who are more submissive to the impulse and guidance of the Holy Spirit and who because of their intimate union with Christ and their holiness of life, are able to say with St Paul: 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.' (Gal 2:20)" (n. 12).

— Finally, the problem of the "style" of the interior life of the priest in care of souls, has its place here. The Council tackled it with courageous clarity: "Priests"—the *Decree*, just quoted, points out— "who are perplexed and distracted by the very many obligations of their position may be anxiously enquiring how they can reduce to unity their interior life and their programme of external activity. This unity of life cannot be brought about merely by an outward arrangement of the works of the ministry nor by the practice of spiritual exercises alone, though this may help to foster such unity. Priests can however achieve it by following in the fulfilment of their ministry the example of Christ the Lord, whose meat was to do the will of him who sent him that he might perfect his work" (n. 14). These words constitute a specific reinterpretation of the many precious reflections that have matured in the course of the centuries on the relationship between *active life* and *contemplative life*. One thing is certain: if the priest's conscience is imbued with the immense mystery of Christ, if it is completely possessed by it, then all his activities, even the most absorbing ones (active life) will find a root and nourishment in contemplation of the mysteries of God (contemplative life), whose "steward" he is.

b) The second aspect of the priest's vocation to holiness I have located in his task of building the community of the People of God. It might seem an "exterior" aspect, bound up with the institutional dimension of the Church and therefore not significant from the point of view of personal holiness. Yet the whole teaching of the Second Vatican Council, which goes back, moreover, to the most genuine sources of ecclesiology, indicates also in this sector the *proprium* of priestly holiness. The priest, won over by the mystery of Christ, is called to win others over to this mystery: he lives this

"social" dimension of his priesthood within the structures of the Church-institution. The priest is not only the man "for others"; he is called to help "others" to become a community, that is, to live the social significance of their faith. In this way, the commitment with which the priest "gathers" (and does not "scatter": cf. Mt 12:30), the commitment with which he "builds" the Church, becomes the measure of his holiness. The greeting with which he begins the eucharistic liturgy: "the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all", becomes his programme: the priest is the spokesman and the intermediary of this communion. He must therefore cultivate in himself an attitude of brotherhood and solidarity, he must learn the art of collaboration, the sharing of experiences, and mutual aid. A living part of the presbyterium, which gathers closely round its Bishop, he must feel continually urged to a missionary projection towards those who are far off, who are not yet part of the "one fold" (cf. Jn 10:16). And finally: since believers walk in time, sustained by hope of the definitive meeting with Christ in his glory, the priest builds the community of brothers by taking his place within it as a witness to eschatological hope. The faithful, to whom he is sent, expect from him, as the decisive seal of his mission, a clear and unmistakable testimony to eternal life and to the resurrection of the flesh. Also the commitment of celibacy must be considered in this light; it then appears as a very important contribution to the building up of the Church and, therefore, as an element characterizing the spirituality of the priest.

3. Beloved Sons, I have lingered over a sketch of the main features of our priestly identity, because the period of Lent is really "the acceptable time" (2 Cor 6:2) for an opportune revision of life before the extraordinary gift of vocation. It is a revision that each one must carry out within the community both of the presbyterium and of the parish, so that it may be expressed in a renewed commitment of Christian life on the part of all. Lent has always marked a relaunching of pastoral activities within the parishes: once there used to be parish missions, special practices of piety, community penitential exercises. Today, in the changed environmental conditions, the commitment for the renewal of Christian life will have to be expressed in other forms. The meetings which I have already been able to have with leaders of the diocesan presbyterium have permitted me to realize the promising flourishing of initiatives planned for this Lent, in the sectors of catechesis, liturgical celebrations, and commitment of charity. I wish to take advantage of this circumstance to express to you my sincere appreciation and cordial encouragement. Work, beloved Sons, without letting yourselves be discouraged by difficulties and failures. Profit from experience to perfect new initiatives, to seek new ways on which to go to meet men, our brothers, and bring them the "Word that saves", a Word for which they are hungering, perhaps without knowing it. The priest as pastor must always imitate Christ—the Pastor who seeks. This search, carried out together with the Good Shepherd in a disinterested and often deeply felt way, confers on his priesthood that stamp of authenticity which is so essential both from the point of view of his priestly personality and from the merely human one which impresses itself on the consideration and esteem of all those who approach him. We must take great care not to "split" our personality as priests. We must take great care not to allow our priesthood to stop being the "most essential" thing for us, the "unifying" element of all our concerns. It must never become something "secondary" and "supplementary".

4. This is the fundamental object of our work on ourselves, of our interior life, in a word, of permanent priestly formation, in its threefold aspect: spiritual, pastoral, and intellectual. We are formed "in order to" carry out priestly activity and we are formed "through" priestly activity. In this field we must have a genuine healthy ambition. It must be important for us to carry out the service of the word as effectively as possible (*How do I preach? How do I catechize?*). It must be our concern to reach souls, to help men in their problems of conscience: confession, spiritual direction—particularly of the persons consecrated to God (sometimes complaints are heard of the lack of good directors). We must, certainly, be with the suffering and the needy. On their side. But we must always be with them "as priests".

5. I have been Bishop of Rome for only a few months. I am gradually beginning to know my new diocese. I realize that my "universal" mission is based on that "particular" one, and therefore I am trying to dedicate myself to the latter as much as I can, availing myself of the great help of the Cardinal Vicar of Rome, of Monsignor the Vicegerent, and of the auxiliary Bishops. In these months I have had the opportunity to visit some parishes, first contacting the pastors of each of them. They have been very fine experiences, in which I had confirmation of the attractive spontaneity of the people, of the open and confident availability of the priests, of the generous vivacity of the laity, especially of the young. In this connection, I am happy to take the opportunity to thank the Cardinal Vicar, their Excellencies the bishops of the zones, the clergy and faithful, for the cordiality and warmth of their welcome. I am counting on these meetings a great deal. It is my intention to make them coincide, as far as possible, with the more thorough visits carried out by the individual bishops of the pastoral areas. I consider it very useful, in these circumstances, to contact directly the groups of laity who are apostolically committed in the parish. Among the latter, I would like to stress in particular the catechetical groups, made up both of parents and of young people, whose work, especially in this time in which there is a lack of priests, is seen to be more and more necessary. Only the commitment of select and well-prepared groups, who are able to involve also the families of the children in that effort of reaching maturity in faith which catechesis must be, can cope with the serious problems raised by a secularized society.

On the basis of collaboration with the families and in the context of a deep dialogue with the young, the apostolate of vocations must be developed. It is really unnecessary for me to dwell on its urgency here. Of course, the fact that this specific pastoral action is more difficult in a city with millions of inhabitants must not be found surprising. If, however, it is carried out methodically and with commitment, it might turn out in the long run to be even more effective in such a wide sphere. I would lay stress, in any case, particularly on the necessity that priests should ask the Lord of the harvest to help them to be effective mediators, by their own lives and by their own instructions, in this work of promotion of vocations.

6. Concluding this meeting with you, my thought flies to the forth coming Holy Thursday, when the whole presbyterium, secular and religious priests, will again be gathered around its Bishop. That is the day of our priestly unity. We must seek a concrete form of this unity, particularly here in Rome,

where—as is known—the clergy is particularly differentiated. We must think of what can serve to deepen this unity and also of what can be done to grasp that which might hinder it.

From the report that was presented to your assembly on 15 February last, the subject of which was "The clergy of Rome faced with the requirements of the diocese", I was able to realize the effort you are making to revive and increase the structures of participation and collegiality, as well as to consolidate the ties of solidarity and communion. It is a programme that deserves all encouragement, because it corresponds responsibly to those requirements of brotherhood which are derived from common priestly ordination, common service, and a common mission. Cultivate, as the usual and conscious attitude of your spirit, a real *affectus collegialis*, as I would call it on analogy with the bond of collegiality which unites the Bishops. This, too, is part of your specific spirituality. Taking leave of you, I clasp you all to me in one spiritual embrace and I bless you all willingly. When, at Easter time, you visit the families of your parishes, take to them the greeting and the blessing of the Bishop of Rome, the humble Successor of Peter, Pope John Paul II.

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