



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF POPE JOHN PAUL II TO THE CLERGY OF ROME

Thursday, 13 February 1997

I would like to thank you for this meeting and especially for your witness. I would like to repeat to you once again a phrase that constantly springs to mind: "Parochus super Papam". I learned this as a young Bishop and I have seen in Kraków and here in Rome how true the saying is. The parish priest always has a basic, direct experience of the local Church entrusted to him. It is also thanks to parish priests that the Bishop can carry out his mission, and this fact increases my gratitude to you, esteemed brothers in the priesthood, especially after 50 years of experience, first in Kraków and then in Rome. Thus I also wished to write something about my vocation, but you already know that and I do not want to repeat it. And now, if none of you is going to speak, I shall conclude and summarize all that has been said today.

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Your Eminence,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and the Priesthood,

1. I greet you with deep affection and am very pleased to have this annual meeting. I address a particular greeting to the sick and elderly priests, and to those who have been attacked and injured in the exercise of their ministry, and I assure each one that I will especially remember him in my prayers.

The Cardinal Vicar in his opening speech, for which I thank him, gave a brief picture of current events in the Diocese of Rome and of the Roman presbyterate in particular. This outline was then filled in and coloured by the accounts many of you gave. It is a picture in which, by the grace of the Lord the lights easily prevail over the shadows: let us thank God!

I cannot forget *the great Vigil of Pentecost* when we began the city mission. This mission is now fully under way, mobilizing the vital forces of the Diocese and attracting the attention and support of the entire city and, I should say, of the whole Church, according to what Bishops from all over the world are telling me. At the same time, the more long-awaited, systematic task of the continuing formation of priests has begun and will help this city mission considerably.

I would like to reflect with you briefly on this theme of *priestly formation*, in the perspective of the preparation for the Great Jubilee and hence of the city mission, recalling also that this is the year devoted to Jesus Christ, the one Saviour of the world, yesterday, today and forever (cf. Heb 13:8), and with reference to the gift I have received of experiencing the 50th anniversary of my priestly ordination.

2. The priest's continuing formation is a way to keep alive in us *the gift and mystery of our vocation*. It is a gift that infinitely surpasses us and is a mystery of divine choice: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide" (Jn 15:16). We must be grateful to God for the gift of our vocation and express this gratitude in our ministerial service, which is concretely the daily offering of our life. Our Eucharist is at the origin and centre of all this: *daily Mass which is the most important moment of our day* and the centre of our life, for in celebrating it, we touch the heart of the mystery of salvation in which our priesthood is rooted and our ministerial service nourished.

Mass puts us in touch with God's holiness and most effectively reminds us that we are called to holiness, that Christ needs holy priests. Effective pastoral ministry, a true "cura animarum", can thrive only on the basis of priestly holiness, as we know from experience.

The primary, essential goal of continuing formation is precisely *reciprocal help in the journey of priestly sanctification*: the diocesan presbyterate, as a true sacramental brotherhood, in fact has an important role in every priest's personal life and this role is expressed in a special way by periods of continuing formation. It is good that younger priests can have regular fortnightly or monthly meetings, primarily to pray together and also for a fraternal exchange about their first experiences as priests. But it is also important for all priests, although at different times, to have the opportunity and joy of being together, of strengthening one another in fidelity to their vocation.

3. Formation naturally supports us on our way to holiness, calling us each day to *conversion*. We are ministers of reconciliation and thus carry out an essential part of our mission through the ministry of the confessional; but we can do so with sincerity and effectiveness if we ourselves first have *constant recourse to God's mercy*, diligently confessing our sins and imploring the grace of conversion.

In turn, every aspect of our ministerial service, our daily efforts, the joys and worries of the parish priest, the curate, the priest teacher, those who work in the Vicariate or are involved with youth,

families or the elderly, all this must have a place in continuing formation. What is important is the perspective in which we see all our ministerial activity. This is why a word from the Apostle Paul can be most helpful: "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy" (1 Cor 4:1-2). *This word "steward" cannot be replaced by any other.* It is deeply rooted in the Gospel: let us think of the parable of the faithful and unfaithful stewards (cf. Lk 12:41-48). The steward is not the owner; he is the person to whom the owner has entrusted his property, so that he can manage it with dedication and responsibility. Precisely in this way does the priest receive from Christ the gifts of salvation for the benefit of each believer and of the whole People of God.

Thus we can never claim to be owners of these gifts: not of the word of God, to which we must witness and present with fidelity, without ever confusing it or replacing it with our own words and views; not the sacraments, to be administered with care and personal sacrifice, according to the intention of Christ expressed by the Church; but not even the facilities, places or material equipment of our parishes and communities: we are responsible as though they were our own and more than if they were our own, not for our benefit but for the good of the portion of God's People entrusted to our care.

At this time of the city mission and in view of making the Church of Rome ever more missionary, let us open as often as possible our churches, our parish meeting places and all the structures we have available in order to meet the needs, the schedules and the desires of our people, who are frequently obliged to keep difficult working hours and need to find priests who are ready to listen and can speak a word of faith, encouragement and consolation.

4. One of the most promising aspects of the city mission is *the great number of lay people* in our parishes and communities *who have offered themselves as missionaries.* The spirit in which they are preparing for their missionary work and the sense of Church they demonstrate are touching. They want to go as Christ's witnesses to homes and families, work places, schools, hospitals, centres for scholarly research and communication, and places for sport and recreational activities.

But all this too has meaning for our ministry and our formation as priests. *The laity are a gift for us* and each priest bears in his heart those lay people who are currently, or were in the past, entrusted to his pastoral care. In a way they show the way; they help us to understand our ministry better and to live it fully. Indeed, we can learn much from our relationships and exchanges with them. We can learn from children, adolescents and young people as well as from the elderly, the mothers of families and workers, from artists and the learned, from the poor and simple. Through them our pastoral activity can be extended, overcoming barriers and penetrating otherwise difficult environments. The city mission is thus a great school of the lay apostolate in this Rome of ours, and so it is also a school of apostolate for us priests.

The special attention the Diocese of Rome is devoting *to young people and the youth apostolate*

this year reminds me of my ministry as a priest and teacher, when I was particularly involved with young people. That experience has remained in my heart and I have tried to broaden it, so to speak, through the initiative of World Youth Days. I know that you are working hard for and with young people, and I ask you to work with them more and more. May the World Day we will celebrate this August in Paris be a further encouragement to investing the Diocese's spiritual and human energies in the pastoral care of youth to form in a profound and truly missionary way the young people who are already close to us, but also to seek out all the young people of Rome, opening doors to them and, as far as we can, pulling down the barriers and prejudices that separate them from Christ and the Church.

5. To be a true help to young people and to all the lay people involved in the mission, and to live fully our own priesthood, it is essential *always to put Jesus Christ at the centre of all our efforts*. St Cyprian rightly said that the Christian, every Christian, is "another Christ" — *Christianus alter Christus*. But we would be even more correct to say, with the whole of our great tradition, *Sacerdos alter Christus*. This too is the deepest meaning of his vocation to the priesthood and of the joy felt by every new priest who is ordained.

Christ must be at the centre of this "Christological year" but also of all the the preparations for the Holy Year and the city mission. The loss of moral sense, practical materialism, the lack of confidence in being able to discover the truth and also the search for an excessively vague and ill-defined spirituality, all help to form those dechristianizing influences which tend to make our people lose their authentic faith in Christ as the Son of God and our only Saviour. We ourselves must be alert to the subtle snares that come from our surroundings and risk weakening the certitude of our faith and the fervour of our Christian and priestly hope.

It is therefore all the more fitting that Jesus Christ, his person and his mission should be the principal reference point for the continuing formation of priests. The more we grow in our relationship with him, indeed, in our identification with him, the more we will become authentic priests and effective missionaries, open to communion and capable of communion, so that we may become more concretely aware of our membership in the one Body of which Christ is the Head.

6. In my book *Gift and Mystery* I recalled the "Marian thread" of my priestly vocation: that thread which unites me with my own family, the parish that formed me, my Church and my homeland, Poland, but also with Italy and this Church of Rome which for more than 18 years has been my Church. "Salus populi Romani". *Mary leads us to Christ*, as she led and leads the citizens of Rome to Christ, Mary "Salus populi Romani". But it is also true that *Christ leads us to his Mother*. Mary brings us closer to Christ, inviting us to live her mystery as the faithful Virgin and Mother. In her, in her womb and in her humble and spontaneous devotion, was brought about the great mystery that is at the heart of the Year 2000 and of all human history: the Incarnation of the Word of God (Jn 1:14).

At the end of our meeting, I would like to renew with you the entrustment to the Mother of God offered us by St Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort. It says: *Totus Tuus ego sum et omnia mea Tua sunt. Accipio te in mea omnia. Praebe mihi cor Tuum, Maria.*

With these sentiments, I impart my cordial Blessing to you all.

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The Holy Father concluded his address by saying:

Thanks be to God everything went smoothly, “secundum praevisa merita”, but also according to the grace of this second day of Lent. After yesterday’s ashes we can enter the Lenten season with trust and courage. So, have courage.

After praying the Angelus, the Holy Father said:

Thank you. I commend myself to your prayers during my Spiritual Exercises in the Vatican next week.

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