



The Holy See

HOLY MASS ON THE OCCASION OF PRIESTLY ORDINATIONS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

St. Peter's Basilica

4th Sunday of Easter, 29 April 2012

[Video]

Venerable Brothers,

Dear Ordinands,

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Roman tradition of celebrating priestly ordinations on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, Good Shepherd Sunday, contains a great wealth of meaning linked to the convergence of the Word of God, the liturgical Rite and the Easter Season in which it is placed. The figure of the shepherd in particular, so important in Sacred Scripture and naturally very relevant to the definition of the priest, acquires its full truth and clarity on the face of Christ, in the light of the Mystery of his death and Resurrection. Dear Ordinands, you too will always be able to draw from these riches every day of your life, and your priesthood will thus be continuously renewed. This year the Gospel passage is the central one from Chapter 10 of John and begins precisely with Jesus' affirmation: "I am the Good Shepherd".

This is immediately followed by the first fundamental characteristic: "the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (Jn 10:11). So, we are led straight to the centre, to the summit of the revelation of God as the Shepherd of his people; this centre and summit is Jesus, Jesus himself who dies on the cross and rises from the tomb on the third day, rises with all his humanity and thereby involves us, every man and woman, in his passage from death to life. This event — the Pasch of Christ — in which he completely and definitively fulfills the pastoral work of God, is a sacrificial event. The Good Shepherd and the High Priest therefore coincide in the person of Jesus

who laid down his life for us.

But let us also briefly note the first two Readings and the Responsorial Psalm (Ps 118 [117]). The passage from the Acts of the Apostles (4:8-12) presents to us St Peter's testimony before the rulers of the people and the elders of Jerusalem after the miraculous healing of the cripple. Peter says with great candour: Jesus "is the stone which was rejected by you builders, but which has become the head of the corner"; and he added, "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (vv. 11-12). Then in the light of Christ's Paschal Mystery, the Apostle interprets Psalm 118[117], in which the person praying gives thanks to God who has answered his cry for help and has saved him. This Psalm says: "the stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes" (Ps 118[117]:22-23). Jesus lived this very experience: being rejected by the leaders of his people and rehabilitated by God, placed as the foundational stone of a new temple, of a new people that was to praise the Lord with the fruits of justice (cf. Mt 21:42-43) Therefore the First Reading and the Responsorial Psalm, which is the same Psalm 118[117], vividly evoke the paschal context and, with this image of the stone rejected and re-habilitated, draw our gaze to Jesus dead and Risen.

The Second Reading, from the First Letter of John (3:1-2), speaks to us instead of the fruit of Christ's Pasch: our having become children of God. In John's words you can still hear his great wonder at this gift; not only are we called children of God but "so we are" (v. 1). Indeed, man's filial condition is the fruit of the saving work of Jesus. With his Incarnation, with his death and Resurrection and with the gift of the Holy Spirit he has inserted the human being into a new relationship with God, his own relationship with the Father. For this reason the Risen Jesus says: "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (Jn 20:17). It is a relationship that is already totally real but not yet totally revealed: it will be in the end when — if God pleases — we shall see his face without a veil (cf. v. 7).

Dear Ordinands, this is where the Good Shepherd wishes to lead us! It is here that the priest is called to lead the faithful entrusted to his care: to true life, to life in abundance (cf. Jn 10:10). Let us therefore return to the Gospel and to the Parable of the Good Shepherd. "The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (Jn 10:11). Jesus insists on this essential trait of the Good Shepherd who is he himself: that of "laying down his life". He repeats it three times and at the end concludes with the words: "for this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this charge I have received from my Father" (Jn 10:17-18).

This is clearly the qualifying feature of the shepherd, just as Jesus interprets it in the first person, in accordance with the will of the Father who sent him. The biblical figure of shepherd-king mainly involves the task of governing, keeping united and guiding the People of God. The whole of this

regal role is totally fulfilled in Jesus Christ in the sacrificial dimension, in the offering of life. In a word, it is brought about in the mystery of the Cross, that is, in the supreme act of humility and oblation love. Abbot Theodore the Studite, said: "By the Cross we, the sheep of Christ, have been gathered into one flock, destined for the sheepfolds of heaven" (*Discourse on the Precious and Life-Giving Cross of Christ*, PG 99, 699).

The formulas of the Rite for the Ordination of Priests that we are celebrating give us this orientation. For example, among the questions that concern the "commitments of the chosen ones", the later, with a culminating and in a certain way concise character, says: "Are you resolved to consecrate your life to God for the salvation of his people, and to unite yourself more closely every day to Christ the High Priest, who offered himself for us to the Father as a perfect sacrifice?". The priest is in fact the one who is uniquely inserted into the mystery of Christ's Sacrifice through a personal union with him, in order to extend his saving mission. This union, which happens in the Sacrament of Orders, seeks to become closer every day through the generous response of the priest himself. This is why, dear Ordinands, in a little while you will answer this question, saying: "I am, with the help of God".

The celebrant then says in the explanatory Rites, at the moment of the anointing with chrism: "The Father anointed our Lord Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. May Jesus preserve you to sanctify the Christian people and to offer sacrifice to God". And then in the presentation of the bread and the wine he says: "Accept from the holy people of God the gifts to be offered to him. Know what you are doing, and imitate the mystery you celebrate: model your life on the mystery of the Lord's cross". It is very obvious that for the priest celebrating Holy Mass every day does not mean carrying out a ritual function but rather fulfilling a mission that involves his life entirely and profoundly in communion with the Risen Christ who continues to realize the redeeming sacrifice in his Church.

This Eucharistic and sacrificial dimension is inseparable from the pastoral dimension and constitutes the nucleus of truth and of the saving power on which the effectiveness of every activity depends. Of course, we are not speaking of effectiveness solely at the psychological or social level, but rather of the vital fruitfulness of God's presence at the profound human level. Preaching itself, good works and the actions of various kinds that the Church carries out with her multiple initiatives would lose their salvific fruitfulness were the celebration of Christ's Sacrifice to be lacking. And this is entrusted to ordained priests. Indeed, the priest is called to live in himself what Jesus experienced personally, that is, to give himself without reserve to preaching and to healing man of every evil of body and of spirit, and then, lastly, to sum up everything in the supreme gesture of "laying down his life", for human beings, which finds its sacramental expression in the Eucharist, the perpetual memorial of Jesus' Passover. It is only through this "door" of the Paschal Sacrifice that the men and women of all time can enter eternal life; it is through this "holy way" that they can undertake the exodus that leads them to the "promised land" of true freedom, to the "green pastures" of never ending peace and joy (cf. Jn 10:7,9; Ps

77[76]:14, 20-21; Ps 23[22]:2).

Dear Ordinands, may this word of God illuminate your entire life. And when the burden of the cross becomes heavier, know that this is the most precious time, for you and for the people entrusted to you: by renewing your “I am, with the help of God”, you will be cooperating with Christ, the High Priest and Good Shepherd, in tending his sheep — even only one stray sheep, but for which there are great festivities in heaven! May the Virgin Mary, *Salus Populi Romani*, always watch over each one of you and over your journey. Amen.

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