



The Holy See

GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

Sunday, 25 April 1999

1. *“I am the Good Shepherd ...; I know my sheep and my sheep know me” (Gospel Acclamation).*

As we continue our journey through the liturgical season of Easter, today we celebrate what is traditionally called “Good Shepherd Sunday”. Jesus applies to himself this image (cf. Jn 10:6), rooted in the Old Testament and very dear to Christian tradition. Christ is the Good Shepherd who, by dying on the Cross, lays down his life for his sheep. Thus a profound communion is established between the Good Shepherd and his flock. Jesus, according to the Evangelist, “calls his own sheep by name and leads them out ... and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice” (Jn 10:3-4). Sheep and Shepherd are united by long familiarity, real knowledge and mutual attachment: he takes care of them; they trust him and follow him faithfully.

How comforting, then, are the words we have just repeated in the Responsorial Psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want” (Jn 10:3-4).

2. Continuing a beautiful custom, for several years I have had the joy of ordaining new priests precisely on Good Shepherd Sunday. Today there are 31 of them. They will dedicate their enthusiasm and fresh energies to the service of the community of Rome and the universal Church.

Together with the Cardinal Vicar, the Auxiliary Bishops, the priests of the Diocese and everyone here, I thank the Lord for this great gift. In a particular way, dear ordinands, I share your joy and that of your teachers, your families and all the friends who have gathered round you at this deeply emotional moment which will leave you with a profound and lifelong memory.

In mentioning your teachers, my thoughts at this time turn to Bishop Plinio Pascoli, whom the Lord called to himself a few days ago. He was rector of the Roman Seminary for many years and then Auxiliary Bishop, dedicating his long life to the care of vocations and the formation of priests. May

his example be a further incentive for everyone to grasp the importance of the gift of priesthood.

3. Dear ordinands, through the ancient and evocative sacramental rite of the laying-on of hands and the prayer of consecration, you will become priests in order to be servants of the Christian people in a new and more profound way, in the image of the Good Shepherd. You will share in Christ's own mission, scattering freely the seed of God's word. The Lord has called you to be ministers of his mercy and dispensers of his mysteries.

The Eucharist, the source and summit of the Christian life, will be the crystal clear spring that will constantly replenish your priestly spirituality. You will be able to draw from it the inspiration for your daily ministry, apostolic zeal for the work of evangelization and spiritual consolation in the inevitable moments of difficulty and inner struggle. By standing at the altar where the sacrifice of the Cross is renewed, you will increasingly discover the wealth of Christ's love and learn to express it in your life.

4. Dear friends, it is very significant that you are receiving the sacrament of Holy Orders on this Good Shepherd Sunday, when we are celebrating the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. Indeed, throughout history Christ's mission is extended through the work of the Shepherds to whom he entrusts the care of his flock. As he did with the first disciples, Jesus continues to choose new co-workers to care for his flock through the ministry of the word, the sacraments and the service of charity. A vocation to the priesthood is a great gift and a great mystery. A gift, first of all, of divine benevolence, because it is the fruit of grace. It is also a mystery because a vocation is rooted in the depths of conscience and of human freedom. It starts with a dialogue of love, which day after day moulds the priest's personality through a formation process begun in the family, continued in the seminary and extended throughout his life. Only through this uninterrupted ascetical and pastoral journey can the priest become a living icon of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who gives himself for the flock entrusted to his care.

The words I will address to you in a little while when I give you the offerings for the Eucharistic sacrifice echo in my mind: "Imitate the mystery you celebrate". Yes, dear ordinands, this mystery you dispense is really Christ himself, who through the communication of the Holy Spirit is the source of holiness and a ceaseless call to sanctification. Imitate this mystery: imitate Christ, be Christ! May each of you be able to say with St Paul: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (*Gal 2:20*).

5. Dear brothers and sisters who are participating in this celebration! Let us pray that these 31 new priests will be faithful to their mission, that each day they will renew their "yes" to Christ and be a sign of his love for every person. We also ask the Lord, on this World Day of Prayer for Vocations, to inspire generous souls who are ready to dedicate themselves totally to the service of God's kingdom.

Mary, Mother of Christ and of the Church, to you we entrust our brothers who are ordained today. With them I entrust the priests of Rome and of the whole world. Mother of Christ and of priests, accompany these sons of yours in their ministry and in their lives.

Praised be Jesus Christ!

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