



The Holy See

LETTER TO PRIESTS 1997

1. *Iesu, Sacerdos in aeternum, miserere nobis!*

Dear Priests, continuing the tradition of addressing you on the day when you gather round your Bishop to commemorate with joy the institution of the priesthood in the Church, I wish first of all to express once more my gratitude to the Lord for the Jubilee celebrations which, on 1 and 10 November last, saw so many brother priests take part in my joy. I offer to everyone my heartfelt thanks.

A special thought goes to those priests who like me celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of their ordination last year. Many of them did not hesitate, despite their years and the distance, to come to Rome to celebrate their Golden Jubilee with the Pope.

I thank the Cardinal Vicar, his auxiliary Bishops, the priests and the faithful of the Diocese of Rome, who showed in various ways their union with the Successor of Peter, praising God for the gift of the priesthood. My gratitude extends to the Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops, priests, consecrated men and women, and all the faithful of the Church for the gift of their closeness and of their prayer, and for the *Te Deum* of thanksgiving which we all sang together.

I also wish to thank all those working in the Roman Curia for everything that they did to make the Pope's Golden Jubilee a means of helping people appreciate better the great gift and mystery of priesthood. It is my constant prayer that the Lord will continue to enkindle the spark of a priestly vocation in the souls of many young men.

During those days, I returned many times, in mind and heart, to the private chapel of the Archbishop of Krakow, where on 1 November 1946 the unforgettable Metropolitan of Krakow, Archbishop and later Cardinal Adam Stefan Sapieha, imposed hands on me, transmitting to me

the sacramental grace of the priesthood. With great emotion I returned in spirit to the Cathedral at Wawel, where I celebrated my first Holy Mass the day after my ordination. During those days of the Jubilee, we all experienced in a special way the presence of Christ the High Priest as we meditated on the words of the liturgy: "Behold the high priest who in his day pleased God and was found righteous". *Ecce Sacerdos magnus*. These words find their fullest application in Christ himself. He is the High Priest of the New and Eternal Covenant, the only Priest, from whom all other priests draw the grace of vocation and ministry. I rejoice in the fact that during the celebrations for the Jubilee of my ordination the priesthood of Christ shone forth in its ineffable truth as gift and mystery for the people of all times, and until the end of time.

Fifty years after my priestly ordination, my thoughts turn every day, as always, to the priests of my own age, both from Krakow and from other local Churches throughout the world, who have not been able to reach this Jubilee. I pray that Christ, the Eternal Priest, will grant that they inherit their eternal reward, that he will welcome them into the glory of his Kingdom.

2. *Iesu, Sacerdos in aeternum, miserere nobis!*

I write you this letter, dear Brothers, during the first year of immediate preparation for the Third Millennium: *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*. In the Apostolic Letter which begins with these words, I indicated the significance of passing from the Second to the Third Millennium after Christ's birth, and I directed that the three final years before the year 2000 should be dedicated to the Holy Trinity. The first year, solemnly inaugurated on the first Sunday of Advent, is centred on Christ. For it is he, the eternal Son of God, made man and born of the Virgin Mary, who leads us to the Father. Next year will be dedicated to the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, promised by Christ to the Apostles at the moment of his passing from this world to the Father. Finally, the year 1999 will be dedicated to the Father, to whom the Son wishes to lead us in the Holy Spirit, the Consoler.

Thus we shall conclude the Second Millennium in a great song of praise to the Holy Trinity. This journey will recall the trilogy of Encyclicals which, by God's grace, I was able to publish at the beginning of my Pontificate: *Redemptor Hominis*, *Dominum et Vivificantem* and *Dives in Misericordia*. I exhort you, dear Brothers, to meditate on these once again during these three years. In our ministry, especially our liturgical ministry, we must always be aware that we are on pilgrimage to the Father, guided by the Son in the Holy Spirit. It is precisely to this awareness that we are called by the words with which we conclude every prayer: "Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen".

3. *Iesu, Sacerdos in aeternum, miserere nobis!*

This invocation is taken from the Litany of our Lord Jesus Christ, Priest and Victim, which was recited in the Seminary at Krakow on the day before ordinations to the priesthood. I included them as an appendix in my book *Gift and Mystery*, published on the occasion of my priestly Jubilee. But

I wish to highlight it in the present Letter, for I think it brings out in a particularly rich and profound way the priesthood of Christ and our link with that priesthood. The words of the Litany are based on texts of Sacred Scripture, particularly the Letter to the Hebrews, but not exclusively. When for example we pray: *Iesu, Sacerdos in aeternum secundum ordinem Melchisedech*, our thoughts go back to the Old Testament, to Psalm 110. We all know what it means that Christ is a priest like Melchisedech. His priesthood was expressed in the offering of his own body, "once for all" (*Heb* 10:10). He who offered himself as a bloody sacrifice on the Cross also instituted its unbloody "memorial" for all times, under the species of bread and wine. And under these species he entrusted his Sacrifice to the Church. In this way the Church — and in the Church every priest — celebrates the one Sacrifice of Christ.

I remember vividly the impression made by the words of consecration when I uttered them for the first time together with the Bishop who had just ordained me. I repeated them the following day in the Holy Mass celebrated in the Crypt of Saint Leonard. And so many times since then — it is hard to count them — I have repeated these sacramental words in order to make Christ present, under the species of bread and wine, in the saving act of his self-sacrifice on the Cross.

Let us once more contemplate together this sublime mystery. Jesus took the bread and gave it to his disciples saying: "Take this, all of you, and eat: this is my body". And then he took the cup filled with wine, blessed it, gave it to his disciples and said: "Take this, all of you, and drink: this is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all, for the forgiveness of sins". And he added: "Do this in memory of me".

How could these wondrous words not be at the very heart of every priestly life? Let us repeat them every time as if it were the first! Let us take care that they are never said out of habit. They express the fullest realization of our priesthood.

4. Celebrating the Sacrifice of Christ, we are constantly aware of the words which we read in the Letter to the Hebrews: "When Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come,... he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your consciences from dead works to serve the living God? Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant" (9:11-15).

The invocations of the Litany of Jesus Christ, Priest and Victim, in some way go back to these words or to others from the same Letter:

Iesu,
Pontifex ex hominibus assumpte,
...pro hominibus constitute,

*Pontifex confessionis nostrae,
 ...amplioris prae Moysi gloriae,
 Pontifex tabernaculi veri,
 Pontifex futurorum bonorum,
 ...sancte, innocens et impollute,
 Pontifex fidelis et misericors,
 ...Dei et animarum zelo succense,
 Pontifex in aeternum perfecte,
 Pontifex qui... caelos penetrasti...*

As we repeat these invocations, we see with the eyes of faith what is spoken of by the Letter to the Hebrews. As a Priest eternally consecrated by the Father in *Spiritu Sancto et virtute*, Jesus now "is seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (*Heb 1:3*). And from there he intercedes for us as our Mediator — *semper vivens ad interpellandum pro nobis* — in order to blaze for us the path of a new, eternal life: *Pontifex qui nobis viam novam initiasti*. He loves us, and he shed his blood in order to wash away our sins — *Pontifex qui dilexisti nos et lavasti nos a peccatis in sanguine tuo*. He gave himself for us: *tradidisti temetipsum Deo oblationem et hostiam*.

Christ brings into the eternal Holy Place the self-sacrifice which is the price of our redemption. The offering — the victim — is inseparable from the priest. The Litany of Jesus Christ, Priest and Victim, recited in the Seminary, helped me to understand all this better. I constantly return to this fundamental lesson.

5. Today is Holy Thursday. The whole Church gathers in spirit in the Upper Room where the Apostles gathered with Christ for the Last Supper. Let us re-read Christ's words of farewell in the Gospel of Saint John. Among the many treasures of this text, I would like to pause at the following words spoken by Jesus to the Apostles: "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (15:13-15).

"Friends": this is what Jesus calls the Apostles. This is what he also wishes to call us who, thanks to the Sacrament of Holy Orders, share in his priesthood. Let us listen to these words with great emotion and humility. They contain the truth. First of all, the truth about friendship, but also a truth about ourselves who share in the priesthood of Christ as ministers of the Eucharist. Could Jesus have expressed to us his friendship any more eloquently than by enabling us, as priests of the New Covenant, to act in his name, *in persona Christi Capitis*? Precisely this takes place in all our priestly service, when we administer the sacraments and especially when we celebrate the Eucharist. We repeat the words that he spoke over the bread and wine and, through our ministry, the same consecration that he brought about takes place. Can there be a fuller expression of friendship than this? It goes to the very heart of our priestly ministry.

Christ says: "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*). At the end of this Letter, I offer these words to you as a wish. On the day of the institution of the sacrament of the priesthood let us make this our wish for one another, dear Brothers: that we may go and bear fruit, like the Apostles, and that our fruit may abide.

May Mary, the Mother of Christ the Eternal High Priest, sustain us with her constant protection along the path of our ministry, especially when the road becomes difficult and the work weighs more heavily upon us. May the faithful Virgin intercede with her Son, that we may never lack the courage to witness to him in the various fields of our apostolate, working with him so that the world may have life and have it in abundance (cf. *Jn 10:10*).

In the name of Christ, with great affection, I bless you all.

From the Vatican, on 16 March, the Fifth Sunday of Lent, in the year 1997, the nineteenth of my Pontificate.