



The Holy See

LETTER OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE NORTH AMERICAN CONGRESS ON VOCATIONS

*To Cardinal Jean-Claude Turcotte
Archbishop of Montreal*

1. For the Montreal Congress on the pastoral work of recruiting vocations for the priesthood and consecrated life in our time, I wish to greet cordially the bishops, priests, men and women religious and laity of the United States of America and of Canada. I am pleased to join you in prayer and I offer my prayerful wishes that your meeting may bring about a renewed enthusiasm and devotion in the heart of those who are involved in this ecclesial work.

The theme of the Congress, Vocation: the Gift of God, expresses well the fundamental dimension of the priestly and religious vocation, and motivates the participants to pass the time of the congress in a spirit of ardent prayer, to beg the light and power of the Holy Spirit.

It is important to remember that in ecclesial communities an intense life of faith and a deep spiritual renewal of the life of the communities will favour a generous response on the part of those who are called by God to the priestly ministry and to consecrated life. In fact, it is the life of prayer and a spiritual climate that make it possible to discover the different vocations that stir up in the hearts of believers the desire to give themselves totally to the Lord in the priestly or the consecrated life.

2. The Congress is the result of a long and conscientious period of preparation, involving local Churches and religious families especially during the diocesan and regional congresses. I am certain that this concentrated work will offer to many delegates, chosen by their dioceses and by various associations, that in the USA and Canada, have the mission of promoting vocations, the opportunity to pursue a deeper reflection on the priestly and religious vocation based on the teaching of Scripture and the documents of the Magisterium. It is more necessary than ever to place the priestly ministry and consecrated life in the perspective of the mystery of Christ and of the Church so that the Church can respond effectively to the challenges and problems that arise in the present social and cultural situation.

To that end, it was opportune to assess all the apostolic forces at work in the different local Churches. This task is one of the more important fruits of the preparatory phase. The data show that certain seminaries are being filled with candidates for the priesthood, that one or other religious congregation is rich in vocations, among other reasons, thanks to the abundance of vocations in the ecclesial movements and communities of recent origin.

3. I give thanks to the Lord for these signs of a promising vocational springtime, and with all my heart I hope that the climate of enthusiasm and faith that one observes in many ecclesial communities reinforce the desire of those who are inclined to give themselves entirely to Christ to spread his Kingdom.

On the issue of the vocation to priestly ministry, I would like to emphasize that it cannot be considered to be a call among many others. In fact, on it depend the realization and development of all other vocations. The priest represents Christ in his office of Head, Pastor, Priest and Spouse.

He is called to act, *in the Person of Christ the Head*, in the more important moments of his service to the Church.

In this perspective, the promotion of vocations to the priestly ministry, a ministry that is one of the constitutive elements of the Church (cf. *Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 16) acquires priority. The Lord continues to call many young men to ministry. But his voice is often stifled by other calls that unfortunately distract the young person spiritually, and by ideas on the priesthood and on priestly ministry that are not in conformity with the Church's faith and tradition.

For this reason, there is a real need for an ongoing pastoral activity that is able to present this vocation in its entirety and offer useful assistance to those who have received the call of the Lord: "*Come follow me and I will make you fishers of men*" (Mk 1,17). One must create an atmosphere that is helpful for these young persons. They must have concrete models who can make the sublimity and goodness of priestly ministry shine forth for them along with the great good of giving oneself completely to Christ to serve the Church. That will encourage them to follow Jesus who wishes to send them as ministers of his sacraments to repeat his words: "This is my Body, This is my Blood", or again, "I absolve you from all your sins".

Moreover, the men and women of our time have a hunger for the word of life and cry out for good guides on the path of holiness.

For all of these reasons, the whole People of God and especially the ecclesiastical authorities and organizations and associations set up to promote vocations have an urgent duty to foster the conditions to give a positive response to the call to the priesthood whenever it comes. At the same time it is necessary to entrust the pastoral care of vocations to the priesthood and the formation of future priests to educators who have the necessary qualities for discerning accurately and for

directing those "called" during the long period of their formation.

4. If promoting vocations to the priesthood is important, no one should think that it is less important to promote vocations to the consecrated life, a life that does not belong to the hierarchical structure of the Church, but is a precious gift for the growth and holiness of the Christian people.

The Ecumenical Council asserts: "The teaching and example of Christ provide the foundation for the evangelical counsels of chaste self-dedication to God, of poverty and of obedience. The Apostles and Fathers of the Church commend them, and so do her doctors and pastors. They therefore constitute a gift of God which the Church has received from her Lord and which by his grace she always safeguards" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 43). Consecrated persons make visible the goods of the world to come and they give witness to the new and eternal life that Christ won for us with the redemption. Moreover, they are called to imitate an abiding re-enactment in the Church of the form of life which the Son of God made his own when he became incarnate (cf. *ibid*, n. 44). Our world, particularly young persons, needs witnesses and models of a life that has in a profound way fulfilled its consecration to God.

Not only ordained ministers but also consecrated persons, even though with different vocations, have a particular mission to accomplish for the good of all. It is useful to repeat here what I mentioned in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (On Consecrated Life), namely, that "the problem of vocations is a real, direct challenge to the various institutes that also involves the whole Church.... They must have confidence in the Lord Jesus, who continues to call men and women to follow him. They must entrust themselves to the Holy Spirit, who inspires and bestows the charisms of the consecrated life.... Besides promoting prayer for vocations, it is essential to act, by means of explicit presentation and appropriate catechesis, with a view to encouraging in those called to the consecrated life that free, willing a generous response which carries into effect the grace of vocations" (On Consecrated Life, n.64).

5. Only a community that is very much committed to the way of holiness and determined to affirm the primacy of the supernatural and to recognize in the Liturgy "the summit and source" of every apostolic work will be able to give birth to the desire and joy of the total offering of self to the Lord and of cultivating the seeds of the vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life that Jesus continues to sow in the hearts of so many young men and women.

Formulating the strong hope that the Congress may be a special moment of grace for the Churches in the United States and in Canada, that they will have a second spring of vocations, I pray that it may contribute to the growth of holiness among all the faithful.

The logo of the Congress, *the Sower who sows abundantly* (cf. Mt 13,3-9,18-23), reminds us that, fortunately, there is no lack of divine vocations. It is still necessary that the seed fall into the good soil, namely, into hearts well disposed to respond generously to Jesus' invitation. To each Church

belongs the mission of preparing the human soil to make it capable of producing abundant fruit.

I cannot bring this message to a close without mentioning the *World Youth Day* to be observed in Toronto in July that is being actively prepared in every church. May this extraordinary event help young people to hear the call of the Lord, who calls them to serve with ever greater generosity the cause of the Kingdom of heaven.

With these sentiments, I entrust the work and the plans of the Congress to the motherly intercession of Our Lady, *Mother of the Church* and *Queen of Apostles*. To each one I warmly impart a special Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 12 April 2002.

JOHN PAUL II

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